

Study Success at the Clash Point of Excellence and Social Dimension?

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Abstract

In our paper, we discuss how and to what extent striving for “excellence” hinders the social dimension of contemporary higher education (HE) systems and higher education institutions (HEIs), taking the study success in the Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) as an example. We review national policies and institutional attitudes towards study success in the four selected countries to identify whether there are measures that could satisfy the demand for excellence and social dimension at the same time. A special case study is devoted to the Czech Republic. We argue that striving for excellence might lead to neglecting aspects not reflected in international rankings or rewarded by national policies such as the quality of teaching and learning, student support, diversity and other social aspects. We argue that various environmental pressures make many institutions invest more resources into excellence, research performance and international reputation rather than into promotion of study success.

Keywords: *Bologna process, drop-out, excellence, higher education, higher education institutions, policy, social dimension, study success, Visegrad countries*

1. Introduction

Traditional higher education (HE) systems and higher education institutions (HEIs) in Europe are under pressure due to increasing demand of various stakeholders and the society as a whole, global developments, political and economic doctrines as well as many initiatives at the EU level (see for example Clark 1997, Enders et al. 2011, Mazzarol and Soutar 2001, Neave 1994, van der Wende 2003, van Vught 2011).

First, we can see a major concern for efficiency of public expenditures and efficient institutional behavior. Second, institutions as well as individual academics are stimulated to achieve higher quality or excellence. Third, higher education institutions are expected to accommodate a more diversified student body, combat dropout and offer more relevant study programs as a part of their social mission.

In our contribution, we look at study success as a special element of social dimension of higher education. We argue that the issue of study success, completion and dropout can serve as an interesting example of how various internal and external pressures – including national and institutional policies – can affect the openness of the HE system. We are particularly interested in how the emphasis on excellence in teaching and research influences the actions taken towards study success on both the national and the institutional level. The most important question is whether study success and excellence can be stimulated effectively at the same time and how. Could universities that are devoted to excellence be also inclusive? Finally – can we find measures, which can contribute to achieving both goals at the same time?

The first part of this paper discusses various demands on higher education as described in selected theoretical literature. Then special attention is paid to the social function of higher education followed by an analysis of the topic of excellence. Afterwards, we shortly summarize the state-of-play of the dropout/study success agenda in the European context. The article describes the four Visegrad countries (V4) – Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – and their approach towards dropout in order to provide for international comparison in the central European context. An in-depth case study is devoted to the Czech higher education system. In the concluding part, we provide preliminary answers to our initial questions.

2. New demands on higher education

Higher education institutions are organizations with a longstanding tradition of searching for truth and maintaining knowledge (Maassen 1997). Contemporary society expects the HEIs to fulfil their core mission in teaching, research and a “third mission”. Many authors argue that in the last few decades traditional higher education systems as well as individual higher education institutions have been facing increasing demands from society in general. Two decades ago, Clark (1997) identified three major demands on higher education which seem to be still valid today:

1. a demand for greater access to higher education;
2. more qualifications and positions on the labor market require a university degree;
3. governments as well as other stakeholders expect more efficient behavior of traditional higher education providers.

In the European context, we should note that the European Commission (EC) has been paying increasing attention to higher education as a tool to facilitate European integration (Neave 1995). The Bologna declaration signed in 1999 launching a complex Bologna process, followed by the Lisbon Strategy (2000) drafted by the European Union can be seen as major milestones in the European higher education landscape.

Due to various demands, global trends, national, EU or international policies and other external as well as internal factors, a modern European higher education institution is facing at least the following challenges:

- to absorb an increasing number of students while the student body becomes more and more heterogeneous in terms of background, abilities and expectations;
- to maintain the social function of HE in society;
- to keep the quality of teaching;
- to attract more fee-paying international students in order to compensate for the decline of domestic student body;
- to meet the rapidly changing requirements of employees;
- to achieve excellence in research;
- to increase knowledge transfer and commercialization of research outputs;
- to demonstrate efficiency.

(Švec et al. 2015)

3. Social function of higher education

International organizations, scholars and policy-makers have underlined the role of higher education in economic as well as social development (for example World Bank 2002, European Commission 2003, Cremonini et al 2014). Bryson, Crosby and Bloomberg (2014) note that citizens would like to have a highly performing HE system, which is efficient in achieving the desired outcomes, operating justly and fairly and generating societal benefits.

In the European context, a social dimension has been formulated and discussed mainly by the European Commission through communications and analytic materials and through the Bologna process. A very short chronological summary of selected policy documents and statements concerning social dimension of higher education is described in the following paragraphs.

Although a social dimension is not referred to in the 1999 Bologna declaration, it has become an integral part of the Bologna process since 2001. In the Prague Communiqué, the social dimension of higher education is explicitly mentioned as an area for further exploration. The 2007 London Communiqué finally defines the objective of the social dimension of higher education:

“Higher education should play a strong role in fostering social cohesion, reducing inequalities and raising the level of knowledge, skills and competences in society. Policy should therefore aim to maximize the potential of individuals in terms of their personal development and their contribution to a sustainable and democratic knowledge-based society.” (p. 5).

The document *Focus on Higher Education in Europe 2010: The Impact of the Bologna process* (Eurydice 2010) describes the impact of the Bologna process on various dimensions of HE systems. Social dimension is the most challenging aspect of the Bologna process as its understanding differs in various countries. Only very few countries set up specific targets to increase the participation of under-represented groups, and only a half of the countries systematically monitors the participation. The most common measures are a targeted financial support and alternative access routes / admission procedures.

The European Commission summarizes achievements concerning access and retention (dropout) in the 2014 document *Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe*. Only nine countries define attainment targets for specified groups monitoring only a few important characteristics on their national level. Furthermore, quality assurance agencies rarely examine admission systems from the

perspective of widening the access. The document underlines societal responsibility of institutions and the system as a whole for minimizing psychological, financial and emotional impact of individuals who do not finish their studies. Further steps should be taken in order to clarify basic definitions, collect proper data, introduce various measures on different levels (institutional as well as national) and monitor their impact.

The 2015 Yerevan Communiqué underlines the commitment to make higher education more socially inclusive by implementing the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) social dimension strategy.

A recent communication '*A renewed EU agenda for higher education*' of the European Commission (2017) discusses two additional aspects of social dimension of higher education institutions: social contribution to the wider communities where they are located, and providing civic values. The higher education systems should create better conditions for inclusion. Study success and higher completion rates are perceived as improved efficiency and returns on public investments.

To summarize this, we can see that at least for the last fifteen years the social dimension of higher education in the European context has gained considerable attention. Its meaning has been gradually demarcated through the Bologna process as well as by the EC policy papers.

However, while discussing the social function of higher education, the European Commission as well as other important societal actors have been at the same time emphasizing excellence in both teaching and science.

4. How to achieve excellence

Global competition in both research and teaching has caused the pursuit of excellence in higher education and science (Marginson 2004, Rust and Kim 2012). In the European context, the political concept of excellence has been closely connected with the 'Europe of Knowledge' discourse (Pineheiro 2015). In higher education, excellence is usually connected with reputation and rankings, both based in particular on research performance in global comparison. University league tables and international rankings have played increasing role in the pan-European context (Hazelkorn 2011).

The concept of excellence is exclusive and competitive by its own nature translating into policy measures focusing on the concentration of scarce resources, i.e. people and funding (Antonowicz et al. 2017). Academic excellence is believed to be a scarce good present only in a limited number of institutions with specific features related to internationalization and size (Maassen & Stensaker 2011).

THE World University Ranking, QS World University Ranking, the Academic Ranking of World Universities (Shanghai Ranking) or the CWTS Leiden Ranking are eagerly monitored by university leaders and managers, the students and the press. The main criteria of these rankings are the academic reputation, research performance, internationalization, cooperation with business or regional involvement. The European Commission (2010) note that European higher education institutions should attract more top global talent and perform better in the existing international rankings as only relatively few of them have reached the leading positions so far. Some European countries that felt unrepresented in international rankings have implemented reforms targeted at supporting top universities (France), world-class science (Germany) or world-class university (Finland) (Cremonini et al. 2014).

5. Study success

As mentioned earlier, study success is an integral part of policies promoting the social dimension of higher education. Nevertheless, the topic of study success and dropout was discussed already in the 17th century and reached considerable attention in particular in the United States (see for example

Berger and Loyd 2005). The most quoted modern theoretical conceptualizations have developed since the 1970's, and the one of Vincent Tinto (1993) has become probably the most influential one. Tinto builds his theory on the concepts of social and academic integration of students, stressing both the importance of individual as well as institutional characteristics for study success. Detailed reviews of theoretical as well as empirical work in the field have been done for example by Larsen et al. 2013, Kuh et al. 2006 or RANLHE project 2011.

Over the time, a broad variety of terms has been used in the scholarly literature to address study success (completion, graduation, retention, persistence, survival, attainment, re-enrolment or time-to-degree) and dropout (stop-out, discontinuation, attrition, wastage, turn-over, dismissal, withdrawal or student departure). In our contribution, we use the terms "success" and "dropout", and in specific cases the terms "completion" or "graduation".

As reviewed by the HEDOC project¹ (Vossensteyn et al. 2015), policies addressing student success and dropout are currently being developed in most European countries. The topic is high on the agenda in almost half of the countries. National governments take actions to improve chances for students to succeed, employing a broad range of measures. These cover financial measures (incentives for both institutions and students, ranging from funding formulas and project funding to scholarships and tuition fees), information and support (mentor, counselling, consultancy, rankings and other measures) and organizational changes (such as increased flexibility of study pathways, curriculum changes, revision of admission criteria or quality assurance procedures). In the following text, we take a quick look at how the issue of study success has been approached in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

6. Visegrad countries and study success

The main source for this comparative part of the paper is the HEDOC study (see above) and country reports. The following country reports have been analyzed by the authors:

- **Czech Republic**, written by Aleš Vlček (with the support of Václav Švec and Šimon Stiburek) and summarized by Martin Unger (Vossensteyn et al. 2015, Annex 2, 31-35),
- **Hungary**, written by József Temesi and summarized by Renze Kolster (ibid., Annex 2, 76-79),
- **Poland**, written by Marek Kwiek and summarized by Sabine Wollscheid and Elisabeth Hovdhaugen (ibid., Annex 2, 119-121),
- **Slovakia**, written by Alexandra Bitusikova and summarized by Sabine Wollscheid and Elisabeth Hovdhaugen (ibid., Annex 2, 129-130).

Unfortunately, no comparable data is available to compare the dropout rates across the Visegrad countries. The most recent comparison was provided by OECD in its 2013's Education at a Glance (Table A4.2), where indicators used by the national stakeholders were collected. According to the review, 75% of newly enrolled students who started their first study in a full-time ISCED 5A program in the Czech Republic in 2001 graduated in any study program in 2011 or before. In the same time, based on a cross-section comparison, 72% of Slovak students who enrolled between 2006 and 2009, depending on the standard duration of their study program, were estimated to graduate successfully. The same is true for 64% of the same cohort in Poland and 66% of those who enrolled in 2006/07 or 2009/10 in Hungary (OECD 2013). As we see, the Czech Republic figures are based on a true cohort

¹ The main task of the research assignment on dropout and completion in higher education was to conduct a comparative overview of the main policies and measures in 36 countries, including eight in-depth case studies. The European Commission awarded this research to a consortium led by the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) at the University of Twente, the Netherlands and the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation (NIFU), Norway in 2014.

analysis while the others build on a cross-section comparison. As additional differences in national methodologies are likely to occur, the figures should be interpreted with extreme caution².

According to the HEDOCE study, a range of measures to fight student dropout and promote success have been implemented by the governments in the V4 countries. The most prevailing one is the introduction of financial incentives for students to complete their studies in time. All four countries have introduced this measure in a similar way – charging fees to students who exceed a set time limit for completion. Although the impact of these measures has not been rigorously evaluated, it can be expected to motivate students to proceed with their studies swiftly. However, it seems that fees charged in the final phase of studies do not prevent students from dropping out in earlier years, or in the moment they are required to pay the fee.

Poland and Hungary have taken actions to provide students with more relevant information, in particular in relation to career prospects and employability. These initiatives are expected to reduce student-program mismatch, stimulate student motivation and attract attention of applicants to the fields most relevant for the economy and society. Graduate tracking and graduate surveys are conducted in order to collect necessary information in this respect. In line with that, both countries have introduced financial incentives for students directing them to priority fields, in particular engineering and other STEM areas. The Czech Republic is currently in the process of preparation of a comprehensive information portal with a similar goal. In Slovakia, tuition fees have been introduced for part-time study programs in order to promote full-time study, where higher quality of learning is expected.

In the Czech Republic, social scholarships for students with special needs were introduced to improve their chances of completing their studies. Although only a small number of students qualifies for the grant, and the overall amount of support is not large, those who receive financial support are more successful than average. In addition, special funds are available to higher education institutions for modernization and innovation projects targeted at improving the quality of teaching and services. These funds are not specifically targeted on study success, however, various projects related to this agenda have been supported as well.

Hungary seems to be the most active country in the region in adopting measures to prevent dropout and shorten the time students take to graduate. Besides the measures mentioned above, other steps have also been taken in the Hungarian higher education to stimulate study success – in particular the introduction of university centers providing mentoring and counselling to students in need. In addition, a legal framework was adopted in order to improve recognition of prior learning to motivate students transferring from one higher education institution to another or bringing competence acquired outside the university. Moreover, success and dropout statistics are required in HEI self-evaluation reports and are reflected by the Accreditation Committee during external quality assurance process.

It is worth noticing that the V4 countries also share, to a great extent, the way they conceptualize the study success and dropout. In all four countries, the number of students entering the system increased rapidly after 1990 – it resulted in an augmented heterogeneity of student body. Broadening the access to higher education in general is often seen as the main reason for the dropout increase by the decision makers in the V4 countries. Most of them view dropout as a positive phenomenon helping keep the “quality” of education high.

² For more on the differences between individual calculation approaches and other issues see e.g. OECD 2013 or Vossensteyn et al. 2015.

It seems that the most frequently articulated motivation for the V4 countries to tackle student dropout is the economic reasoning: low success rates are considered to be inefficient, consuming the scarce resources without leading to the final product – graduates needed at the labor market. This is in line with the adoption of measures to stimulate early completion (see above). The general ideas of social dimension and fair access to education do not appear to be the main drivers promoting this policy.

In none of the V4 countries the issue of study success and dropout dominates the higher education policy agenda. It is quality and excellence, which are often quoted as the main priorities. The only exception might be Hungary, where substantial attention has been dedicated to stimulating completion, in particular in order to increase the number of graduates in priority areas such as engineering.

In the following part, we take a deeper look at the Czech case study in order to illustrate the development of study success policies in the context of the promotion of social dimension and excellence.

7. Case study of the Czech Republic

First of all, we look at how the issue of dropout in higher education is described in strategic documents of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS).

Attention was paid to this issue as early as in 2000 (MEYS 2000), yet only limited measures were suggested, stating vaguely that the flexibility of study pathways should increase. In the following years, the study success policy did not receive any considerable attention, rather the opposite. The 2005 Strategic Plan (MEYS 2005) highlighted the context of economic efficiency, and in the subsequent period³, the promotion of social dimension in HE remained underemphasized.

The topic of study success and dropout reemerged in the policy documents in 2014 in the ministerial Framework for HE Development (MEYS 2014). The topic appeared on the agenda as a result of external pressure from the European Commission. The EC asked for a strategic framework covering a list of agendas, including dropout as part of the social agenda, to be defined before approval of operational programs funded by the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) for the period 2014-2020.

The Strategic Plan 2016-2020 (MEYS 2015), which is the major strategic HE document currently in effect, builds on the 2014 framework and adds more specific measures and goals. The policy of student success and dropout seems to be finally an established part of the HE policy agenda. However, only limited measures have been introduced so far, and many policy actors (such as the management of HEIs) rather tend to maintain their elitist perspective, considering dropout a desired event “weeding out low quality students” (Vlk et al. 2017).

In the meantime, the dropout rates have grown gradually. Since 2005 less than one half of studies started at the undergraduate level⁴ have actually led to graduation, although many of the students dropping out returned to the system again later. Dropouts are mostly prevalent in the fields of study such as agriculture, engineering and science, but all the other disciplines are also affected. The success rates are even worse at the postgraduate study level where only about one third of enrolled students graduate. On the other hand, about three quarters of students succeed at the master’s level.

³ Central-right coalitions were in power in the Czech government bringing tuition fees and diversification of higher education high on the agenda (see e.g. MEYS 2009).

⁴ A study is not equivalent to a student. One individual student can be registered at several studies / study programs, even at the same faculty or university. As a result, the number of studies is always higher than the number of students within the system.

At this point it should be stressed out that the ability of the government to steer the HEIs is rather limited. Institutional autonomy and self-governance, inspired by the Humboldtian idea of a university, remain the dominant organizational principle of the HE system in the Czech Republic (File et al. 2006). Thus, the government directly influences neither the internal organizational processes and structures of universities, the content of the study programs, the modes of teaching, the HR decisions, nor institutional actions taken to promote quality and student success. Indirect measures are in place (accreditation criteria, performance-based funding formula and other financial incentives – see below), however, these are usually a result of rather complicated negotiations with HEI representative bodies. Financial incentives are probably the most influential instrument applied by the Ministry of Education to affect the behavior of the HEIs. Among them, the funding formula reflecting student numbers, internationalization, graduate employment as well as research performance (with the specific criteria varying every year) is the most important one, accompanied by project funding for strategic projects and extensive investments from the European funds.

Mostly indirect measures are in place in case of study success and dropout policy. For the above-mentioned reasons, the policy documents highlight the importance of measures on institutional level – they recommend HEIs to invest into teaching initiatives, social integration and analysis of the dropout causes and drivers. Such measures are supported by the so-called Institutional Programs allocated by the MEYS to individual institutions for strategic innovation projects and quality assurance. However, study success is only one of many priorities the program is targeting.

Besides financial incentives promoting institutional actions towards study success, measures to improve access to information about study programs and graduation rates have also been implemented. Since 2016 dropout rates have been published in annual reports of higher education institutions. In its Strategic Plan, the Ministry also emphasizes that more research into the topic should be undertaken (MEYS 2015).

At the same time, multiple steps have been initiated to promote and support excellence in Czech higher education. In particular, research performance of individual institutions has become crucial for public funding. The concept of excellence is connected mainly to publication output and qualification structure (number of associated professors and professors). It should be also mentioned that the existing system of funding research in the Czech Republic is purely quantitative. It is based on a sophisticated mathematic formula transforming the points assigned to various research outputs (journal articles, books, conference contributions, patents, prototypes etc.) into institutional funding of research organizations (see for example Good et al. 2015).

The support for achieving excellence is also present at the programs funded by the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). There are special calls targeted at excellent teams as well as excellent research centers. Other granting agencies (supporting either basic or applied research) also support excellence. In the public discourse, one can find a strong argument that mainly excellent organizations, excellent teams and excellent outputs should be supported, while the mediocre ones should be gradually pushed outside the system.

To summarize, the concept of social dimension has been the driving force behind the development of the study success policy only since 2014. Furthermore, it was introduced to the agenda by an external force – the European Commission. On the other hand, the struggle for quality and excellence has been perhaps the main concept attracting the attention in the Czech higher education. The pursuit of excellence has often been quoted as the main reason why not to take actions to reduce student dropout.

8. Concluding remarks

In the concluding part, we come back to our key question – whether study success and excellence can be stimulated effectively at the same time and how.

It seems that the excellence concept, based mainly on the research performance and publication outcomes, has preoccupied the academia in the analyzed area of Visegrad countries. To a great extent, it is due to the parameters that are fundamental for table leagues and international rankings. This trend is being further reinforced by the system of institutional funding. Therefore, at least in the Czech Republic, the teaching role has lost its priority. Individual academics as well as institutions do not have enough time and resources to devote to teaching, as they have to publish, get grants, administer projects and cooperate with business. They must prioritize. Naturally, the social dimension, including the study success and drop out, is not seen as the top issue. On the contrary, it could be even perceived as an extra burden on the journey to excellence. For example, during our interviews with HE stakeholders within the HEDOCE case study, only one person felt that the dropout rates could be lowered without downgrading the quality of teaching.

The best way to describe the stage of the Czech higher education system (based on the data, we suppose that the same is true also for many other Central and Eastern European countries including the V4) is the following: according to the share of age cohort entering the system, higher education has moved from mass into universal access model (Trow 2006). However, most of the institutions and mainly the academics still mentally stick to the idea of elite higher education, in which only a small number of top motivated and gifted students are educated. For many of them, the main motivation is research and academic carrier – not teaching and transfer of knowledge to young generation.

For the above-mentioned reasons, we expect that most of HEIs devote their resources to the excellence “agenda”, unless the social issue is directly required and financially stimulated, or the dropout rates reach such a high level that they jeopardize the existence of a department, faculty or university. Therefore, we see higher education institutions using the label “research excellence” rather than “exemplary in social dimension”.

In our opinion it is rather difficult, especially in the V4 countries, to find the proper balance between the pursuit of excellence and the social function of higher education. Interestingly enough, the countries with the shared history of the former communist regime seem to be most persistent in keeping the most conservative and elitist approach towards higher education closely connected with the research mission. The social dimension has not been adequately internalized neither by the academia, nor by the public.

The seeming “clash” between the social dimension and excellence is only one example of the pressures HE management face, resulting from a variety of expectations from the higher education system. In many cases, the management feels that the demands and expectations contradict each other. In order to meet the requirements of the social dimension (provide access to quality education to broader masses of students with respect to their diverse needs), HEIs should invest substantial efforts in reducing student dropout. In many cases this means revisiting the traditional academic curriculum, supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds and reflecting special needs of non-traditional learners and many other steps.

However, we believe that there are several measures on the institutional as well as national level that can support excellence and study success at the same time. We can think, for example, about curricular and teaching initiatives stimulating student engagement, peer-review of teaching methods, publication of QA evaluation results to increase the prestige of proactive, innovative and student-oriented programs, etc. However, any measure requires adequate resources.

Another question is the level of the HE system diversification. In diversified systems, a small number of institutions are devoted to excellence (mainly related to research), while others reflect mainly the social role as well as the rapidly changing needs of the labor market and the society. This could mean supporting a small number of exclusive “excellent” universities that would maintain the high dropout rates and selective practices (low social dimension), and at the same time applying different quality criteria to “the other” (second-tier / regional / applied) institutions preferring the social dimension to research performance and global reputation. Such a model is has not been (fully) implemented in the observed countries at the moment, although it being widely discussed.

It is not easy at all to find a proper and general solution. Cremonini et al. (2014) ask whether concentrating public resources at the most excellent universities – rated high by external rating organizations – improves the overall quality of a higher education system as a whole. For example, targeting research performance alone might help a top-tier institution, yet at the expense of the others. The authors also argue that pursuing rankings should be complemented by other policies inducing system improvements.

To conclude – as it seems, it is becoming increasingly difficult to combine policies on the national level with specific measures on the institutional level. The described “clash” between the social dimension of higher education on the one hand and the excellence of research on the other is just one example. However, we believe that there are ways for the higher education policy to face these challenges, especially with the help of exchanging best practices and intensive involvement of relevant stakeholders.

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