What do university students think about the roles of intellectuals? Empirical findings of a Hungarian analysis

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Abstract

There is a debate in the field of social sciences about the role of intellectuals. Several possible directions can be distinguished: professionals, the intelligentsia, and public intellectuals. These types have their own historical, geographical, and political backgrounds. If we regard universities as places in which intellectuals are trained, we must also emphasise the importance of higher education. Despite rich empirical findings, little is known of the theoretical background. In this paper, we use a quantitative method to analyse what university students think about the components of intellectuals' roles. Our database is based on a nationwide Hungarian student survey from 2017 (N=1502). We created our self-made question block with 18 items, which correspond to the components of intellectuals' roles. Undergraduates had to then assess these items. We find that students have mixed conceptions in the analysed field. The components of the professional role are strong, in accordance with national educational policies, but other elements are also significant. The features of classical intellectual habitus are also strong (general knowledge, white-collar work, etc.), but the components of public intellectuals and macro-level aims have lower importance.

Keywords: higher education, intellectuals, professional roles, students

1. Introduction

We must regard the system of higher education as the place of students' socialisation process and as the framework where several elements of knowledge (vocational and general at the same time), norms, values, or components of behaviour can be transmitted (Weidman, 2006; Kaufman & Feldman, 2004; Graham, 2005). The wider and formal system of this process is the organisation of universities with their own manifest aims and rules. Nevertheless, several segments of the process may be hidden – e.g., the effects of peer-networks, leisure time activities, and cultural or social events. We must also consider that students are not passive participants in this process because they can form the climate of the institutions and influence lecturers at the same time. In sum, the process of students' socialisation is complex and not unidirectional.

The most important aim of higher education is obviously to transmit the elements of vocational skills and knowledge, but students must be regarded as would-be intellectuals.

From this aspect, university is a place where they can learn those elements which belong to their later social and vocational roles. The literature has distinguished intellectuals' possible role types according to specific geographical locations, historical periods, disciplines, or political frameworks (Fónai, 1995). The notion of 'the professional' emerged in the 19th century due to the modernisation process and contains mainly vocational knowledge and elements. For 'public intellectuals', public or critical functions gain greater importance: these people can form and take part in public debates. In semi-peripheral or peripheral environments (e.g., in Eastern Europe), the 'intelligentsia' acts as a role model and introduces ideas. The Hungarian case is unique due to the semi-peripheral position, the effects of earlier and current political situations, and the utilitarian emphasis of actual education policy.

The birth of universities in Europe remained in close relationship with the emergence of the social group of intellectuals in the Middle Ages (Goff, 1993), but over the centuries the institutions and external contexts have also changed. The approach which distinguishes between elitist and mass higher educational systems is frequently used but contains some simplification. The universities always apply the path of social mobility (with different efficiency), and the current systems have been differentiated. Moreover, the possible patterns of intellectual roles have also changed due to the use of internet and mediatisation (Fleck et al., 2006; Davis, 2006), which transform 'public intellectual' roles, and because of the attitude to knowledge, the changing landscape of high culture consumption (Peterson & Kern, 1996), the effects of postmodern theories (Bauman, 1987), and naturally the political systems at all times (Auer, 2006; Ettrich, 2007). The latter context fundamentally shapes the possibilities of the critical and public functions of intellectuals.

In this paper, we analyse students' similar conceptions about intellectual roles, and try to reveal the factors that can form these conceptions. To uncover these patterns, we created a question block with 18 items, which was tested during a nationwide Hungarian student survey in 2017. These items correspond to the possible components of roles in intellectual life: professionals, public intellectuals, and the intelligentsia. The novelty of this paper is the quantitative methodological approach, and the relevance is the transformation of higher educational institutions due to the educational expansion, marketisation (Bok, 2004), and the increase of vocational and utilitarian expectations (Panton, 2005). We suppose that our empirical findings help reveal patterns in relation to future Hungarian intellectuals. We use principal component analysis and a linear regression model, whereby the principal components are identified through the components of roles. We try to reveal a wide range factors which can form the patterns of intellectual roles (gender, parental educational level, economic capital, the type of settlement, the type of training course, religiosity, and disciplines).

1.1 The transformation of universities

Earlier we have named some external elements which can form the conceptions about intellectual roles, but we must focus on the transformation of universities first. This transformation is a complex notion. The current landscape of the system of higher education is shaped by social demands, financial causes, the market situation in higher education, central educational policies, and other factors. Of course, we cannot provide a detailed picture about this whole process but describe some of its elements nonetheless.

Our first starting point is the evolution of the mass higher education system, which can form the possibilities and tasks of higher education in the field of intellectuals' training. This process increases the proportion of so-called first-generation students (Pike & Kuh, 2005),

who do not bring those patterns, norms, and habitus-components from home which belong to intellectuals' life. For these students, universities are not familiar spaces but a strange world. The tasks of some universities in this situation are changed because they must install such elements of knowledge and skills with their axiomatic presence in the elitist segment of higher education. This change can shape the cultural climate of universities (cultural events, communication, language use, etc.) as well as the contents of planned effects from the direction of the institution. Panton (2005) emphasises that universities must fit into students' demands, which can also be observed in this field. Integration into university along social events and peer-group networks does not fit into high culture consumption or the habitus of the middle class.

Another important factor belongs to the framework of working method at universities. This transformation, summarised by Fitzgerald (2012) and Bok (2004), consists of the following: marketisation, closer relationship between industry and universities, the dominance of applied research projects, regarding students as consumers, quality insurance, and the quantification of the whole teaching process (Naidoo, 2005). This shift has created a more controlled institutional system in which some intellectual functions have become less relevant (critical or public function, the independence in the field of research or ideas, etc.). Some disciplines fit into this new framework to a lesser extent, which regrettably reduces the importance of arts, fine arts, or social sciences. The scientific literature (Reuben, 1996) noted that some elements of intellectual roles stay in close relationship with these disciplines (moral statements, ideas, etc.).

The transformation of the student body has already been described. Another especially important factor is the expectation of students towards universities regarding how they would like to enter the institution and which skills they want to learn. Specific literature has highlighted that these expectations have become more utilitarian (Veroszta, 2010) and the demands belong increasingly to practical skills (Lähteenoja & Pirttilä-Backman, 2005). This frame moves students away from the theoretical content of the given disciplines, the teaching method of lectures, and courses which remain in close relationship with general knowledge or elements beyond the students' narrow profession. This transformation may also reduce the chance of dialogues or debates in the classroom with lecturers or peers about public issues. In the phase of expansion of research, the activity of undergraduates has changed. Students are less likely to include in their demands these skills, which are simply not needed at an earlier level. The diversification of the higher education system generates vast gaps between institutions and can reduce the research-oriented attitude in the 'lower' segment of universities (where the proportion of first-generation students is higher). These shifts are important for us because intellectual roles may include the production of ideas and research products or the transmission of these elements towards society. If the goal of undergraduates is the fast integration into the labour market, the useful contents are more practical and vocation-oriented for them. This shift can be linked to the 'professional' role.

The situation of lecturers has obviously changed, as well. This transformation has come to the forefront of debates (Hoenig, 2017; Enders, 2009; Scott, 2005; White, 2012). The work of lecturers has become more complex (teaching, research, administration, taking part in applications, etc.). In the lower segments of higher education, lecturers must undertake tasks which rather belong to social work or psychology (Bocsi, 2019). Some empirical findings have reported a higher level of workload after the Millennium as well as a higher level of alienation (Barnett, 2000). Due to the audit and quality insurance system, the higher importance of scientometrics, and the claim of transparency in the teaching process,

independence and autonomy seem to be on the decline. Applied research projects may channel the topics of research projects. This shift could separate teaching from research, and the controlled circumstances may decrease the 'public intellectual' functions of lecturers.

1.2 Hypotheses

According to the literature, we have formulated the following hypotheses:

H1. We suppose the highest positions for 'vocational' items and the role model of the 'professional' due to the utilitarian expectations of students and the current education policy (Bok, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2012). In this phase of empirical analysis, the means of items are described.

H2. We suppose the strong effect of disciplines in the linear regression model according to Bok (2004) and McInnis (2010), who claim that disciplines have their own norms and rules (Neave, 2009), which also create different organisational cultures. We assume that these organisational cultures contain the different patterns of intellectual roles. In the regression models, the dependent variables are the principal components, while the independent variables are the following: socio-demographic variables (gender, economic capital, parental educational level, the type of religiosity), the type of training course, and disciplines.

2   Methods

Our empirical data come from a nationwide quantitative research project carried out in Hungary ("Family and Career" project – led by Ágnes Engler in 2017). The aim of the research project was to describe the students' conceptions of gender roles, child-rearing, and students' parenting (Engler, 2018). The question block regarding intellectual roles is found on the last page of the questionnaire. The number of respondents was 1502. The respondents came from 11 higher educational institutions in Hungary (three from Budapest and seven from other towns: Eötvös Loránd University, Semmelweis University, University of Debrecen, Óbuda University, University of Nyíregyháza, University of Szeged, University of Pécs, Eszterházy Károly University, Szent István University, Debrecen Reformed Theological University, and University of Kaposvár).

The type of the sampling was stratified, and the aspects of the sampling were the following: regions of the country, the size of the institutions, and disciplines. The population consists of full-time students in bachelor's, master's, and combined programmes, i.e., programmes combining a bachelor's and a master's programme (except first-year students in bachelor's and combined courses). The leaders of the research project chose the institutions based on the disciplines offered by the universities, and the locations of the universities. Law and economics are classified as social sciences, and informatics as engineering. Medicine also includes nursing. For teacher training courses, disciplines are determined according to the field of study (e.g., a literature teacher is classified as studying humanities). This encoding was used during the whole research project.

We have created a block of questions with 18 items, which discover the components of intellectuals' roles. These items are based on the literature (definitions of intellectuals, the possible roles such as professionals, public intellectuals, etc.) with the intention of covering every segment of the intellectual life and roles concerned. The respondents evaluated the items on a four-grade scale (e.g., expertise, analysis of social notions, intellectual

independence, high culture activities, preservation of national culture, benevolence, beauty, etc.).

The independent variables in linear regression model were gender, the type of the settlement, parental educational level (mother and father separately), objective economic capital,[1] the type of training course (bachelor's, master's, combined) and scientific fields. Gender was used as a dichotomous variable (1 = male, 0 = female). The parental educational level was used as a continuous variable with the number of completed years of education (most parents attended higher education before the Bologna system, so completing a college degree was coded as 16 years of education, and a university degree as 17). Dummy encoding was used for the type of settlement (reference category: smaller towns, other options: capital city, county seat, village), disciplines (reference category: agronomy, other options: humanities, social sciences, science, engineering, fine arts, theology, and medical studies), religiosity (reference category: uncertain, other possibilities: non-religious, 'I am religious and follow the rules of my church', and 'I am religious in my own way') and the type of programme (reference category: bachelor's programme). We decided to use religiosity as an independent variable to separate the effect of theological training courses from the effect of religiosity.

3 Results

3.1 Participants

The proportion of women in the sample was 56%. Most respondents attended bachelor's courses (10 percent were in master's courses or were senior students from combined courses). If we go through the subsamples by discipline, it turns out that engineering, medicine, and humanities are the most populous subsamples (N = 388, 277, and 266, respectively). The second lowest number is theology (N = 55). The number of agronomy students was too low to use as a separate category (N = 26), so during the linear regression model the latter subsample was used as the reference category.[2] The mean of the objective economic capital index was 7.26 (*SD* = 1.649). Overall, 10 items were used with a maximum value of 10 and a minimum of 0 in the whole sample (0 = not possessed by the household, 1 = possessed by the household). Some 30% of fathers and 38% of mothers have a degree. The proportion of low-educated parents (below graduation) is 27.4% for fathers and 16.2% for mothers. Of all students, 9.4% come from the capital city, 19% from a county seat, 45.8% from a smaller town, and 25.5% from villages and farms. About 67.6% of students attend a bachelor's training course, 11.1% a master's training course, and 20.5% take part in undivided higher education (training of lawyers, doctors, and teachers). Some 13.7% said that 'I am religious, and follow the rules of my church', 6.9% were uncertain, 28.2% were non-religious, and 39.9% said that 'I am religious on my own way'.

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[1] Components of the index: Does the family have its own apartment or house, cottage or plot, a flat-screen television, a personal computer, or laptop with broadband internet access at home, a tablet or e-book reader, mobile internet (on the phone or computer), a dishwasher, an air-conditioner, and a smartphone or car?

[2] The division of the subsamples was the following: 17.7% - Arts, 15.5% - Social Sciences, 8.2% - Science, 26.5% - Engineering, 18.4% - Medicine, 7.3% - Fine arts, 3.7% - Theology, and 1.7% - Agronomy.

3.2 Empirical findings

The reliability of the block of questions was tested (the Cronbach alpha score was .812 and the lowest score among the items was .792, so every item was retained). Our first step was to analyse the mean of the items (Table 1).

Table 1. The students' conceptions about intellectual roles (N= 1502, means of four-grade scales)

	M	SD
Competence in the field of your own discipline	3.47	0.65
Benevolence and beauty	3.33	0.73
General knowledge	3.30	0.67
Degree, adequate educational level	3.28	0.78
White-collar work	3.22	0.72
Being a role model. Improving local community and society.	3.14	0.83
Independence (from institutions and politics)	3.11	0.82
Knowledge of special literature	3.00	0.77
Spreading and using research findings. Improving society.	2.99	0.79
Preservation of national identity and culture	2.95	0.84
Consumption of high culture	2.86	0.81
Contribution to and spreading of European and/or global culture. Setting up international relationships.	2.80	0.84
Mediation between social groups or pressure groups	2.78	0.83
Analysing and criticising social phenomena	2.77	0.88
Taking part in public affairs and fulfilling public functions	2.74	0.77
Creating scientific or artistic products	2.56	0.90
Participating in public debates and having a presence in the media	2.43	0.92
Controlling authority, criticising, and taking part in a demonstration	2.30	0.96

Source: own table

With the help of the items, principal components were identified. During this process 11 items were saved (KMO: 0.714, saved information: 59.6%). Table 2 shows these patterns (criticism and public life, classical, moralist and national, and knowledge-oriented components).

Table 2. The principal components about intellectual life (N=1502, principal component method, varimax rotation)

	criticism and public life	classical	moralist and national	knowledge-oriented
Competence in the field of your own discipline	-.168	.251	.039	**.721**
General knowledge	.128	.090	.117	**.783**
Participating in public debates and having a presence in the media	**.659**	-.138	.216	.395
Taking part in public affairs and fulfilling public functions	**.774**	-.061	.083	.000
Knowledge of special literature	.113	**.580**	.023	.298
White collar work	.010	**.655**	.161	.200
Independence (from institutions and politics)	.022	**.719**	.109	-.043
Analysing and criticising social phenomena	**.622**	.372	.195	-.079
Benevolence and beauty	-.053	.226	**.794**	.086
Preservation of national identity and culture	.157	.072	**.809**	.088
Controlling authority, criticising and taking part in a demonstration	**.743**	.138	-.206	-.089

Source: own table. Numbers above .30 are in bold.

Our last step was to carry out the linear regression model, in which the dependent variables were the principal components. Table 3 shows the empirical findings of three models.

Table 3. The regression model of conceptions about intellectual roles
*(beta values, p≤0.05, sig. = 0.000: ***, sig. between 0.001 and 0.0 = **, sig between 0.01 and 0.05 = *)*

	criticism and public life	classical	moralist and national	knowledge-oriented
Gender (0=man. 1=woman)	-.119**		.111**	
Economic capital (with index)				
The type of the training course (reference: bachelor's course)				
Master's course				
Combined course				
The type of settlement (reference: smaller town)				
Village				
County seat				
Capital city	.088*			-.114**
Parental educational level				
Fathers' educational level (with completed years of education)		.092*		
Mothers' educational level (with completed years of education)				
Religiosity (reference category: uncertain)				
'I am religious and follow the rules of my church.'			.177**	

'I am religious in my own way'				
Non-religious				
Disciplines (reference category: Agronomy)				
Humanities	.271**	.226**		
Social sciences	.226**			
Science				
Engineering		.188*		
Medical studies	.215**			
Fine arts	.137*			
Theology			.131*	
Adj. R^2	.290	.196	.301	.223

Source: own table

4   Discussion

Based on our empirical findings, we can model students' conceptions of intellectual roles, which clearly shows a mixed pattern with professional and classic intellectual elements ('Benevolence and beauty', 'General knowledge') as dominant. The items of criticism, the elements of public intellectual life, and macro-level effects are less important. The moral component ('Benevolence and beauty') seems to be far from the postmodern attitude, and the low level of critical and public intellectual functions can be explained by the dissonant relationship of Hungarian young people with policy and politics. The effects on intellectuals only materialise in the close environment of the individual (see the position: 'Being a role model. Improving local community and society'). According to the literature, we supposed the dominance of professional elements to be based on the theories which analyse the transformation of universities. The first hypothesis was verified but our empirical findings show us a more diverse picture. Moreover, the item of 'Knowledge of special literature' has minor importance.

In our second hypothesis, we supposed the most dominant effects in the regression models for disciplines. Before this step in the analysis, the principal components were identified. We must highlight that the patterns of factors do not perfectly fit into the theoretical background of intellectual roles. The first factor is similar to the notion of 'public intellectual' but the others show us that the theoretical categories cannot be clearly derived from our empirical results. The vocational items are separated from each other, and the moral and national elements are interlocked. The pattern of the second (classical) factor seems to resemble the notion of free-floating intellectuals (Mannheim, 1993) but also contains 'The knowledge of special literature'. The conception of the third (moralist and national) factor combines two traditional elements. According to the empirical findings, the effects of disciplines seems to be important for some factors (but not all principal components), so this hypothesis was only partially verified.

Certain socio-cultural variables may also shape the content of intellectual roles: women and students from the capital city seem to be further apart from 'public intellectual' roles. Church-based religiosity stays in close relationship with the 'moral and national' factor. The higher educational level of fathers promotes 'classical' conceptions (perhaps the fathers'

educational level is linked tighter to the habitus and prestige of middle class than that of mothers). Public elements are not typical in the case of theology, engineering, and science. Theological training could form a 'moral and national' attitude (while religiosity also has a similar effect). The effect of engineering requires further investigations – perhaps this relationship can be described with qualitative techniques. The connection between humanities and 'classical' conception seems to be logical.

5   Conclusion

The most important edification of our research is the mixed patterns of students' conceptions about intellectual roles. Although the transformation of universities and the educational policy support the presence of 'professional' elements, and the expectations of undergraduates connect with the labour-market-oriented attitude, the ideas of intellectual roles contain various elements. The macro-social aims seem to be less important, which may predict a standoff of future intellectuals in Hungary from public issues. We can interpret this result with the help of the special features of the political socialisation process in Eastern Europe (Szabó, 1990) or the relatively passive attitude of Hungarian youth (Oross, 2013). The different norms and beliefs of the disciplines can also be verified, and we can analyse these special elements with the regression model. It is clear-cut that students in some fields are not involved in public issues and debates, but the traditional and moral elements are not typical either – with the exception of theology. The change in the female share within a given profession can form the later public behaviour of intellectuals (because gender is significant in the case of the first and third principal components).

In this analysis, we have tried to reveal university students' concepts of intellectual roles with quantitative techniques and to compare our empirical findings with theoretical frames and the current situation of universities. This analysis can be interpreted as a pilot study and the testing of the first version of a self-developed question block. We are planning the use of qualitative analysis later to reveal the emergence of these patterns and the effects of higher educational institutions. With the help of interviews, we hope to focus on the specific subcultures inside universities and also to reflect on the process of how conceptions evolve.

6   Limitations

Our research has several limitations. Firstly, the block of questions we used was our own creation, so we do not have the chance for international comparison. Secondly, other scholars might have used other items during the operationalisation. This was a nationwide analysis, but the Hungarian situation is special due to the semi-peripheral position and post-socialist features of the country – nonetheless, the empirical findings can be more relevant in Central and Eastern Europe.

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