

# Students with Small Children in Higher Education

AGNES ENGLER<sup>1</sup>

*Institute of Educational Studies  
University of Debrecen*

## Abstract

*The aim of the present study is to describe the concept of lifelong learning in the case of a special group, that of student mothers. We examined female students bringing up small children, we did research on their motivation, their difficulty and success in learning path in a longitudinal research project. A central question of the research was whether the investment in higher education during the maternity leave helps women in their return to work. We have also examined the strategies women follow when they choose a course in higher education.*

**Keywords:** Higher Education; Adult Students; Women; Small Children; Investment in Human Resources

## Introduction

The survey described in this study focuses on a not very thoroughly researched subject, that is the progress in studying in higher education of female students who have small children.<sup>2</sup> We surveyed their experience in higher education in the framework of a longitudinal research project. Hungarian laws enable women to stay at home with their small children for a period of three years, during which their employment is not terminated and they receive a certain percentage of their original wage, depending on the type of the maternity care they choose. The period they may spend at home is longer than the European average and affords immeasurable advantages in bringing up a child, but during the time they are away from the labour market their original knowledge, skills and expertise may erode.

Permanent self-education during the inactive period may compensate for the disadvantages caused by staying away from work and help the mother to re-integrate into the labour market. Studies pursued during the maternity leave, however, require considerable material and immaterial investments. It is necessary for the mother to carefully calculate whether the investment will produce the desirable results.

## The Model of Interpreting the Investment in Studying and the Return of the Investment of Non-Traditional Students

Theories of cultural reproduction, rational decision making, and capital investment related to studies partly served as a framework of the research project. We created a model of investment and return based upon the concept of Becker (1964) on the investment of human capital, combined with Bourdieu (1986) and Schultz's (1961) ideas and theories of capital. The model is capable of describing investment into higher education and the potential return of the investment at individual and collective levels. Students who have small children, similarly to other students, invest in their

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<sup>1</sup> Postal Address: Institute of Educational Studies, University of Debrecen, H-4032 Debrecen Egyetem tér 1. Debrecen, Hungary. E-mail Address: [engler.agnes@arts.unideb.hu](mailto:engler.agnes@arts.unideb.hu)

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own human capital when they opt to pursue studies in higher education. The concept of investing into human capital was described by Schultz (1961), who identified the objective of the investment as the acquisition of various skills and expertise that are necessary for satisfying future needs and for increasing future income. Schultz, in his calculations, summarizes the items of expenditure from the aspect of the state; the specific amounts spent on the education of an individual, the maintenance of the institutional infrastructure, the costs of labour in higher education and the loss of income of the students during their study period. On the other side of the equation, the return is the increase of the national revenue. We consider the state as a collective investor in the education of students with small children as the state offers them lowered tuition fees, thus undertaking some of the costs of education for them.

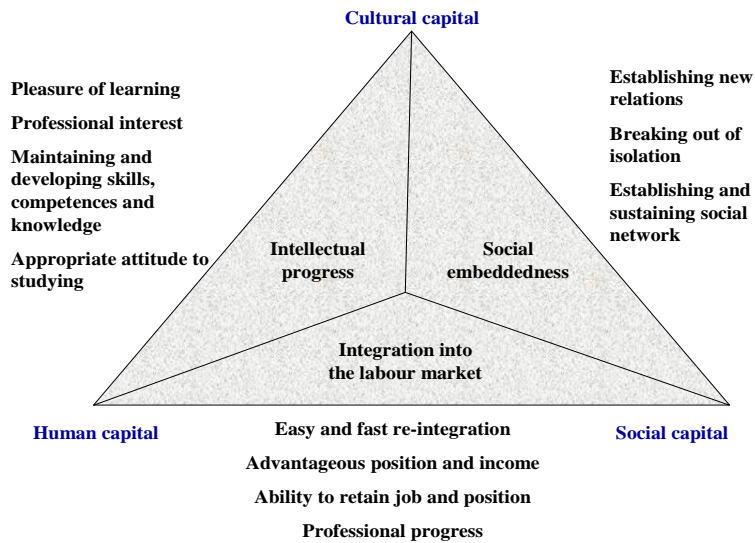
The details of the students' investments are summarized in Table 1. The costs of the individuals are analysed, among others, by Rosen (1991). The expenses include tuition fee, the direct costs of studies, the value of the time spent studying, the delayed entry in the labour market, and the income loss suffered during the studies. In addition to those, in the case of students with small children there are other costs, too: the loss caused by their drop-out of household chores, the care and supervision of the child(ren) while the mother is doing her studies. Apart from purely material investments, there are other changes in the narrow community of investors, that is the family (they will tend to spend less time together, roles within the family may temporarily change, free-time activities are given up etc.) and these changes all appear on the investment side of the equation.

**Table 1:** *Individual Costs of Studies of Students on Maternity Leave*

<b>Costs of Studies of Students on Maternity Leave</b>	
<i>Direct expenses</i>	<i>Indirect, non-financial investment</i>
Direct expenses of studying (travelling, accommodation, meals, books, photocopying)	Time spent with the family reduces (the role as mother and wife may change)
Costs generated by the individual's partial drop-out of household work (Paying somebody for household work, child care and supervision)	Utilizing social capital outside the family (help from friends, colleagues, organization under the individual's new circumstances)
Giving up a certain part of the person's regular income (various types of maternity allowance and/or other revenue)	Study efforts (regular and effective learning, attending consultation sessions, exam stress, managing one's time, etc.)
Personal expenses (clothing and beauty care etc.)	Different use of free time (partially abandoned cultural and community programmes, hobbies, holidays etc.)
Other costs in connection with studies (e. g. private tutor, foreign language courses, costs of Internet use)	Relations with relatives and friends loosened up

Source: self construction based on Rosen, 1991

The need of obtaining a college or university degree is usually associated with the labour market. (Engler, Tózsér & Szilágyi, 2012) During the expansion of the higher education in Hungary in the early nineties, one of the most important elements of motivation of young people to enter a college or university was the fear of unemployment (Polónyi & Tímár, 2001). Changing social expectations induced a change in the composition of college and university students (Kozma, 2004) and, as large numbers of people graduated from the institutions of higher education, a social stigma was attached to the lack of a degree (Nagy, 2003). In the case of students who have a small child, however, it is assumed that there are other elements of motivation and other envisaged return of the investment, in addition to the need of meeting social expectations. In Figure 1 we outlined the fields into which we arranged the expected return and yield of investments made into higher education. The fields are labelled "Intellectual progress", "Integration into the labour market" and "Social embeddedness". The peaks of the triangle link together the fields of return and indicate the types of capital where return is expected as a result of the studies, specifically human capital, cultural and social capital.



**Figure 1:** *Fields of Return of Advanced Studies of Students with Small Children and the Types of Capital Accumulated*  
Source: Engler, 2011

In the model illustrating the yield of investment made into education the elements of various theories were amalgamated, as the answer sought to our question is built up from building blocks that originally belong to different concepts. We extracted the elements from their original context, and added them into our own model. For instance, the cultural capital accumulated as a result of intellectual progress is originally close to Bourdieu's definition of incorporated cultural capital, and as a secondary meaning it may also indicate the accumulation of institutionalized cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In our model we attributed special significance to the fact that cultural capital as "the most heavily disguised inheritance" is transferred with the smallest loss of time and with the greatest efficiency in families that themselves already possess a large amount of cultural capital. It is important for us because female students with small children enrich their own existing cultural capital, and their increased capital shall in turn contribute to the cultural capital of their children.

Even though they share a number of common features, Schultz's human capital and Bourdieu's cultural capital are treated separately in our model, as we emphasize only one major feature of each of those concepts. Under the term of "human capital" we examine the usability of the educational investment in the labour market, the value of the degree, in case of new qualification, the increase of human capital as a result of education, results in an easily found job, a higher income, and a more advantageous position. Whereas investment into human capital is usually measurable in financial terms – expenses and returns – the increase in Bourdieu's cultural capital is a more complex phenomenon. As it has been mentioned earlier, for our research, incorporated cultural capital is of primary importance. That kind of capital, similarly to human capital, is unalienable from the individual, takes time to acquire, and the individual acquires it in a largely unconscious way. The acquisition of that capital largely depends upon the cultural capital of the family in which the individual lives (Bourdieu, 1986). That basic cultural capital of the family is further enriched through the education of the individual. What the student invests into his or her own education is, first and foremost, time and also a "socially determined libido" that involves sacrifices and failures as well (Ibid.) Here we refer to the characteristic feature of that kind of capital that learning becomes a part of the personality, that education will be connected to the individual in a number of ways.

The next segment of the triangle, symbolizing intellectual progress and connecting human- and cultural capitals, shows that we expect a return of the investment in higher education in terms of the students' attitude to learning. Similarly to incorporated cultural capital, this is difficult to precisely define. The attitude of the students is different from the material return, which is easily detected in the labour market. At the same time, the effects of this barely tangible immaterial return are much further reaching in the individual's professional career than the direct effects experienced in the labour market. The purpose of utilitarian learning is the hopefully fast and palpable return, but knowledge as

a value is the foundation of incorporated cultural capital. We intend to illustrate this assumption by Pléh's contrast pairs, in which he places pragmatic approach in opposition to the Humboldtian ideas. In the latter, education and knowledge are a source of pleasure. Quoting Mill's (1962) theory, Pléh argues that "knowledge in itself, independently of, and regardless to its use and profitability, enriches the personality" (Pléh, 2004, p. 205). We believe that this idealistic approach to education will be detectable to a certain extent among women studying in higher education. There will be female students who look upon education as a value. We shall term their activity as value-rational work, as opposed to the previous attitude that may be categorized as purpose-rational activity (cf. Weber, 1968).

We also expect a return of the investment made into higher education in the field of social embeddedness, which is the third field of return, with peaks in social and cultural capital. Women on maternity leave do not only drop out of the labour market temporarily, but they also suspend their participation in social communities that used to be part of their daily life previously, especially their work colleagues. But right after childbirth, commitments with the baby keep the mother away from gatherings of the family and friends, educational and entertainment opportunities as well. As students of a university or college they become a member of a different community. Prins, Toso & Schaft (1996) demonstrated the positive effects of a community of students among marginalized social groups. Zrinszky (1996) found solitude and lack of communication as a motivation among elderly people.

At this point we arrive at the third pole, that is, increase in social capital. We agree with Coleman that social capital is a positive relationship among people that motivates positive action of the individual. We ascribe special importance to social capital within the family (Coleman, 1988), as the transfer of capital within the family is only ensured when parents spend sufficient time with their children (cf. Pusztai, 2009). We believe that social capital outside the family shall increase in new forms of relationships that emerge between students, and between students and teachers.

## A Description of the Research

We examined the investment made by students with small children into higher education and the return of that investment in the course of a longitudinal research programme, following students in higher education from their decision to start studying all the way to using their newly acquired degree in the labour market. Samples were taken from the students bringing up small children at two major regional institutions of higher education, the University of Debrecen and the University College of Nyíregyháza. A regional approach was used, as the return of the investment into education was to be examined in similar education-ecological environments. Ten faculties of the University of Debrecen, and four of the University College of Nyíregyháza were involved in the research.

Because of their particular situation and problems, female students receiving a maternity benefit usually choose corresponding courses, so students attending these part-time courses were found to be most suitable to be approached first. The difficulties in finding a number of individuals in a similar situation, and the data protection rules binding the administrative units of the universities, a random systematic sampling appeared to be the most suitable method for the purposes of the research.

The first phase of the research took place in 2006, when female students receiving a maternity benefit and studying at the two institutions of higher education were contacted (N=226). Students selected for the sample received the questionnaires designed for self-respondents by mail. During phase two, that of the cohort examination, in 2009, we met graduates of the two institutions they obtained the degrees from during their maternity leave and had been working for at least one year (N=121). In this phase we were not able to rely on any kind of data base or register, so we did not continue the research with a probability selection method. The employees chosen through a snowball method completed the questionnaires with the assistance of interrogators.

Our preliminary assumption regarding investments into higher education, based upon cultural reproduction and rational decision making theories and capital theories was that social background determined the entire educational career of the students. We therefore paid special attention to the existing basic qualification of the students when we examined their decision making strategies at adult age. We carried out the analysis through a comparison of the group of those who had a GCSE before starting their studies in higher education and the group of those who had a diploma – that is who started a postgraduate course. Hereunder we briefly summarize the results of our research into

the investment made by female students with small children into higher education and the return of that investment.

### Investment of Students into Higher Education

When examining the decision making mechanism regarding the start of studies in higher education, we identified four major factors of motivation. *Environmental effects* included the incentives received from the closer family, friends and acquaintances of the students. We examined the investment strategies in the micro-environment in the two groups of students, and found that women without a degree received more encouragement from their parents, partners and friends alike than the women with a college or university degree. In the hope of the envisaged benefit (earning a diploma), the members of the micro-environment of women without a degree estimated the costs of studies for women with a small child less effectively.

When the student began studying, members of the investing micro-environment fully or partially abandoned her with the expenses and did not help with the extra burden in the struggle for a degree. The gap between the benefit expected in the future and the costs emerging in the present caused tensions and made several undergraduate female students reconsider their attitude towards studying, sometimes even their role in the family. The problem also caused considerable conflicts in their micro-environment as well (see Table 2). On the other hand, those students with a degree, whose families had a higher cultural capital, did not need any encouragement or any illustration of the expected benefit; their inner motivation, rooted in their social milieu, directed them towards starting their studies in higher education. During the process, the community investing in the studies of the individual undertook some of the extra costs of the person's learning, so they found the extra costs of education for a degree less depressing.

**Table 2:** *Difficulties Arising during Studies, in a Breakdown According to Preliminary Qualifications, in percent (N=226)*

Difficulty	Undergraduate	Graduate	Total
Lack of family support**	37	20	27.1
Problems with child care and supervision*	77	63	69
Raising funds for the studies***	80	50	62.4
Exam stress***	88	63	73.8
N	103	123	226

\*\*\* sign. = 0.000 \*\* sign. = 0.004 \*sign. = 0.05-0.01

The motivation arising from a woman being on maternity leave is constituted by free education and the fact that as a new mother she stays at home. During the time when the survey was made, all mothers on a maternity leave were exempted from paying tuition fee in Hungary. Students who had already had a diploma made efforts to get advantage of the situation. According to the answers they gave to the inventory, for 80% of them free education was a major reason when they decided to start studying. It was also a powerful motivation for undergraduates, as 70% of them identified free learning as an important incentive. A surprisingly high percentage (more than 60%) of the students who have started their studies said that they would certainly stop studying if a tuition fee were introduced. It illustrates how important a motivation free education really is, when prospective students make a decision about investing in higher education. We found it necessary to examine whether those who said that they were going to continue their studies anyway were not closer to the end of their study course, thus facing relatively smaller financial burden than those who still had several semesters to go and pay a lot of tuition fee. No correlation, however, has been found between the intention of the respondents to go on with their studies and their remaining semesters.

There were major differences between the two sample groups in terms of decision-making strategies related to higher education and also in the accomplishment of the study courses. Highly qualified students, usually working as professionals, who were also financially in a better position, had a more elaborate decision-making strategy for a longer period of time, showing signs of a homogeneous family atmosphere. By contrast, undergraduate students with a lower financial status tended to calculate the potential benefit of obtaining a higher education degree, the risks and the advantages, on short term only.

It explains why the families of the students with secondary education suffered mostly from the mother's efforts invested into studying, as they were able to coordinate their educational and family commitments with difficulties, they lacked the necessary flexibility in organizing their tasks, and their efforts invested into studying caused regular conflicts in their lives. We also assumed that learning attitudes, efficiency and motivation of the two groups were different as well.

There is a strong correlation between the social background and the achievement of the students. The students with improved socio-economic background are more successful in their studies, which shows that the cultural reproduction is working also in the adult education. The demographic background is significantly different in the two groups. Those who have a college or university diploma are coming usually from large towns, have highly educated parents, and their husbands own one or more degrees. Women who do not yet have a degree are living usually in small towns or villages, grow up in larger families, usually with lower level educated parents, and secondary level educated partners. According to the cultural reproduction theory the examined groups have distinct learning paths. Undergraduates study preferably in college, while students who already have a degree rather continue their studies in a traditional university. Less than half of the first groups speak foreign languages, by contrast, almost 90% of the students of the latter. In the last semester the undergraduates had medium-high average, while students with a degree have completed at much higher levels.

According to our inventory, *intrinsic motivation* as personal investment in studying included individual ambition, professional interest and love for studying. In our sample, intrinsic motivation for the participants of the survey to start studies in higher education appear to be powerfully relevant: personal ambition is on the top of the list of priorities, reaching 90 on a 100-grade scale of value preferences. Professional interest and love for studying follow, with 83% and 80%, respectively (See Table 3).

**Table 3:** *The Priority List of the Elements of Motivation for Learning. Graduates and Undergraduates Separately (N=226)*

	Undergraduates	Graduates	All respondents
Obtaining a degree	92	78	85
Personal ambitions	90	90	90
Hope of more easily finding a job	90	79	85
Professional interest	81	85	83
Love of studying	77	82	80
Using the time of maternity leave	74	80	78
Using the opportunity to study free of charge	71	77	74
Hope of promotion at work	65	72	69
Reinforcing work position	58	63	61
Encouragement from spouse, partner	56	51	53
Encouragement from parents, siblings	48	44	46
Encouragement from friends	44	37	40
N	103	123	226

Besides the factors of external motivation, the desire to obtain a degree became a priority similarly high to primary motivation. It suggests that the desire to study and plan a career are both present in the background of the decision making before the commencement of the studies. There are differences between the two sub-patterns in terms of the primary and secondary elements of motivation. For those who already own a degree, studying is primarily a result of internal urge, they are motivated by personal ambitions, love for studying and professional interest. The desire to earn another qualification and the hope of finding a better job are in a different imaginary "second sphere" of their thinking. It is explained by the fact that the members of this group are in possession of one or more degrees that enabled them to successfully find a job, and now they expect similar advantages.

64% of the respondents in the sample had a job at the time of the survey, while close to 25% lost their jobs during the maternity leave. Less than half (48%) of the respondents who had a valid employment contract during the maternity leave were sure that they wanted to return to the same job. In the group of those who were certain that they wanted to return to their original job, the proportion of graduates was found to be higher (62%). *Position reinforcing effect* means that the person intends to reinforce his/her situation at their place of work, or to get a promotion, whereas *position-acquiring*

effect is the desire to find a job in the labour market more easily. It appears that the women who do not yet have a degree expect to improve their position in the labour market after earning a college or university qualification. Those who have a college or university diploma hope that they will be able to keep their jobs and have a promotion when they have an extra qualification.

The answers to the inventory suggest that women staying at home with small children are strongly preoccupied with the problem of returning to work. The ways and means of returning are thoughts they constantly deal with during the maternity leave; it explains how carefully they make their plans for the future. The fact that they decide to enter higher education aptly illustrates it, as during – or even before – the time they spend at home, they carefully consider their return to work. Earning a college or university degree is expected to help them in their return. The students participating in the survey mentioned the lack of foreign language skills and inappropriate qualifications as the most common factors impeding them in finding a job. The students supplying data for the research are worried about the level of their qualifications and, more than half of the respondents, found the market value of their certificates too low. The data suggest that their decision to start new studies is motivated by the wrong choice of their original career and/or by the devaluation of their original qualification.

### Work, Studies and Bringing up Children

In this chapter we reach back to the past of the respondents, making an attempt to analyze the period in the life of the students when they left the labour market. Students with small children were asked about the hopes and worries that they experienced when they suspended their career in order to give birth to a child. The alternatives offered on the answer sheet referred to the characteristics of the maternity leave, their attitude to learning and the possibilities of returning to work in order to reveal the advantages and disadvantages the respondents experienced during their active and inactive periods.

**Table 4:** *The Hopes and Worries Experienced by the Respondents when they Left the Labour Market. Figures in Percents. Graduates and Undergraduates Separately (N=226)*

	Hopes and worries	All respondents	Undergraduate (n=103)	Graduate (n=123)
Ideas regarding their existing knowledge and qualifications	Qualification competitive. No problem in returning to work	20.0	20.4	19.5
	Will do self-training during stay at home*	74.3	60.7	<b>80.5</b>
	Worried about the erosion of skills and competences	39.4	33.0	<b>44.7</b>
	Worried because child may take up all her time. No chance to learn	14.6	16.5	13.0
	Worried about a break in her career	5.4	5.8	10.6
Ideas regarding the labour market	It will be easier to find a job when she is over childbearing	14.2	10.7	17.1
	Employers do not like women with small children**	54.9	<b>63.1</b>	48.0
Ideas regarding the respondents' direct environment	Family is first for her	57.1	57.3	56.9
	Staying at home with the child charges her with new energy	26.5	20.4	<b>31.7</b>
	Bringing up the child exhausts all her energies	13.3	15.5	11.4
	New friendships are made during the maternity leave	34.5	30.1	38.2
	Friendships and relations with colleagues weaken during maternity leave	30.1	32.0	28.5

\*\*sign. = 0.03 \*sign. = 0.05

Note: Figures in **bold** are higher than expected in the case of a purely random distribution of the data.

The alternatives offered on the answer sheet split in three categories. The first sums up the answers in connection with the knowledge, skills and competences during the period of the suspended career. The second group of answers relates to the labour market, whereas the third category contains the answers in connection with the direct environment of the individual (See Table 4). The ideas connected to the labour market and the direct environment of the person concerned offer the conclusion that undergraduate students tend to worry more about work and family (e.g. employers do not prefer women with small children, the personal relations weaken etc.). Students who already have a degree are more positive (e.g. they think they will find a job more easily, new relations will be established). As for suspending the career, the situation is reversed: postgraduate students tend to worry more about the missed years and the weakening of skills and competences (48-33%), and they are also afraid that their career may suffer a major break (6-11%). Concerns about the latter is experienced only by several percents of the group of undergraduates, whereas ten percent of the graduate students worry that it would not be possible to compensate for the time lost during the maternity leave.

More than half of the graduate students worry about the erosion of skills and competences, and the same concern is noted at one third of the undergraduate students as well. Concerns regarding the depreciation of competences necessary for work were present in both groups when they left the labour market, but it is more characteristic of the graduate students. They decided to invest in their individual capital during maternity leave in a considerably higher proportion than persons in the other group (80-60%). In this way they hoped to avoid loss of competences caused by the drop-out of work, and they also prepared to meet new challenges in the labour market, as 80% of them were under the impression that the degree they already had is not competitive enough.

These observations offer sufficient data regarding the motivations behind the intentions of the students to obtain new positions and reinforce their old ones in the labour market. In relation with the motivations of students to start their studies we found that postgraduate students intended to go in for higher education as they had a positive attitude towards studying. When selecting a course, however, their decisions were based upon pragmatic aspects, the market value of the major subject chosen, the prestige, the status and the income that the new degree will bring along. Undergraduate students, on the other hand, were primarily motivated by the perspectives of later finding a job, in the sense that they hoped that once in possession of a college or university degree they would be able to more easily find a better job. Graduate students not only expected a financial return for their investment into higher education; they tended to look upon knowledge as an asset, whereas the undergraduates consider studying as a way heading to a desired positions.

### **The Return of the Investment into Studies in the Labour Market**

In the second phase of the research, there was no real difference among the young mothers in terms of the level of their basic qualifications, so we used a different approach. The variables used for measuring changes in the labour market when freshly graduated students return to it have been used to identify the sub-groups within the sample. A meaningful average of the variables were made, and subcategories were set up. The variables have been used according to the respondents who returned to the original job and to those who found a new one. The sample was divided into two major categories: in one of the categories the students were more successful in the labour market than the average. They were labelled as *successful investors*. They used their investment in higher education successfully, and they received the return they had expected. The second sub-group has been called *less successful investors*, although it only reflects the situation at the moment of answering the inventory, as the time of their re-integration into the labour market was too short, therefore they cannot be considered as really unsuccessful investors (See Table 5).



**Table 5:** *Characteristics of the Successful and Less Successful Investments*

The direction of returning to work	Successful investors	Less successful investors
Among those who returned to their original job	Promoted	Continued work under the same circumstances, no change in position and conditions
	Received pay rise	
	Continued work under more favourable conditions	Released from work
Among those who found a new job	Works in position matching the new qualification	The new qualification obtained resulted in no advantage
	Income matching the new qualification	
	Satisfactory working conditions	
	Job and family more compatible	
Regardless the former job	Upward mobility	Downward mobility
	In their own subjective assessment, the degree is competitive	In their own subjective assessment, the degree is not competitive

The larger part of the sample (63%) belongs to the successful investors, 76 people experienced positive changes upon their return to work that were in connection with their new degree. In the case of other 45 respondents (37%) such positive changes has not yet taken place, but considering the original positions and the fact that downward mobility was avoided this may be seen as successful re-integration into the labour market.

We intended to show the return of investment made into education divided in three categories. As a result of investing into the human capital, several forms of return appear in the field of labour market integration. These forms of return are in obvious correlation with the advanced studies carried out during the inactive years. The answers we received to the block of questions focusing on the moment of re-integration suggest that the return of the participants to their job after several years was successful, as almost half of the women returned to their original job. 28% of them changed jobs voluntarily, 10% of them were forced to do so (their employment was terminated), another 10% had another baby, and only two participants of the survey were unable to find a job. During the later years of employment we were able to demonstrate further beneficial effects of the new qualification, including a position matching the qualification, better working conditions, higher income, better ways of matching family and career, and the participants' successful escape from downward mobility. Those who had not had a degree previously proved to be more successful in finding a job. 43% of them were promoted from their previous positions, whereas only 32% of the postgraduate students achieved the same. No downward mobility took place in the two groups.

The group of successful investors tended to worry on the weakening of the knowledge and competences during the years away from work to a larger extent, but nearly half of the other group also shared that concern. After a few years, more than two thirds of women going out to work believed that it is important to learn in the inactive period as well, in order to survive more easily in the world of work later. This idea is shared primarily – and not surprisingly – by the successful investors, who demonstrated their ability to survive in the labour market more easily as a result of their college or university degree. However, fewer agreed that the years directly following childbirth are a good opportunity for studying, even if learning is important (60% of both sub-samples).

The answers received to the open questions in the inventory helped to better understand that attitude. The open questions focused on how the respondent and the family remembered the period of studies after a certain period of time. The answers fall into three categories, labelled *problem-free*, *tolerable* and *difficult*. Those who are in the *problem-free* category, did not suffer from any noteworthy family disadvantage when they were at home with a baby and studied at College at the same time. Some of them even reported positive experience, e.g.: “it was not very exhausting” or “I overcame the difficulties with ease” or “it was good for everyone, the baby spent a day with granny,” or “I was away from the ratrace” or “my husband helped me a lot in the family” or “it was basically positive, the family shared the burden.”

The women who described the period of their studies as *tolerable*, mentioned some difficulties, but they were able to solve the problems: “it was difficult, but the whole family and all relatives were very helpful” or “my husband helped me a lot, but we still had some difficulties” or “we did have difficulties, but there are difficulties in our daily life anyway” or “it was difficult, but we made the decisions together, I studied during the night and my family was helpful” or “it required a lot of organization, patience and it was tiresome, but it was worthwhile”. Those who found the period *difficult*, have largely negative memories: “everything else was ignored, husband, child, and she often thought of giving up her studies”, or “it was very difficult spending the night studying, I was tired, stressed and nervous” or “I moved to my mother during my studies, and travelling was very tiresome for the baby, too” or “there were constant quarrels about who would take care of the baby, she was remorseful for ignoring the baby” or “the children suffered from my stressful situation during the exam periods, I ignored my household, and my husband did not like it” or “I soon gave up breast feeding, and the baby first called my mother-in-law, ‘mother’...”

### The Return of the Investment into Studies in the Attitude of Students to Learning and in Learning Communities

The field of return in intellectual progress was full even during the period of studies. Further elements were added in the time following the return of the young mothers to work. The desire of the participants to learn increased, they began to pay more attention to self-education, and they proved to be very successful in their return to work. It is an interesting development, that women who harvested less return in the labour market developed more inclination and desire to learn.

The overwhelming majority of women investing in advanced studies during the maternity leave (in excess of 70%) found later that the effects of learning were very powerful when they returned to work. They found studying particularly useful in terms of professional skills and competences, but they also experienced positive effects in making up for the lost time (Table 6). In terms of enrolling in and completing further training programmes organized by their employers, one third of the participants found useful their previous studies. A similar proportion of the respondents found previous advanced studies beneficial in personal issues like finding their own place in their respective community and the re-organization of their private life. The only considerable difference between the two groups was detected in (re)starting the highly professional part of their work. The successful investors were more efficient in this respect, probably because they were able to use what they had learnt during their inactive period more effectively. That is another element of the return of the work invested.

**Table 6: Decisive Influence of Studies in Various Fields of Re-Integration (n=93)**

Various Fields of Re-Integration into Work	Successful investors		Less successful investors	
	%	individuals	%	individuals
Joining professional work **	<b>71.0</b>	<b>44</b>	51.6	16
Making up for lost time	50.0	32	60.0	18
Attending further training programmes	44.7	28	37.9	11
Integration. Finding their own place	38.1	24	46.4	13
Bringing career and family into harmony	40.0	25	35.0	11

\*\*sign. = 0.01

Figures in **bold** are higher than expected in the case of a purely random distribution of the data.

The effects of learning in adult age can also be measured through the effects of the adult on his or her environment, and not only through changes in the attitudes of the individual towards studying. In our initial hypothesis we assumed that studying would induce positive changes in the mother’s family, it would enhance the children’s cultural capital, offering further return of the invested capital. We asked female college and university graduates about any change in their attitude towards studying of their children. We found it important as children would only be

able to use their parents' accumulated cultural capital if the parents invest in their children's human capital (Coleman, 1988).

The first signs of return in the field of social embeddedness were observed in joining the community of learners. They were able to break out of the isolation of their homes. This new form of social capital assisted the individuals in re-establishing their relationships with their colleagues. The yield of higher education in the sphere of the family helped the individual in bringing career and private life into harmony. Cultural consumption of these families also changed as they started to consume goods and services typically used by intellectuals and professionals.

Another important effect of advanced studies is that they encourage the environment of the adult learner in life-long learning. It has been noted that women received relatively little encouragement and support from their families to start their studies, but once they have started, their parents and partners were very helpful. The majority of our respondents seemed to have been satisfied with the period of learning in their adulthood because, regardless the sub-group they belonged to, during and after their studies they encouraged their environment to follow suit. 85% of them encouraged somebody in their environment to study. This encouragement was addressed to their direct environment, with half of the women attempting to persuade their husbands, one third encouraged their colleagues, 24% of them wanted to send some of their relatives to college, 15% wanted to see their siblings studying. The lowest proportion, 6%, attempted to persuade their parents. The low figure here is probably explained by the age of the parents.

## **Conclusions**

An examination of the studies of students with small children and their return to work shows that the capital invested during the years study apparently yields a return in a short run. The investment, and its return, has been examined at individual and collective levels. For constraints of space, the latter has not been discussed in this essay. It is to be emphasized, however, that supporting women with small children in their studies and return to work may have considerable benefit in the long run. Such a benefit may be an improvement of the demographic situation, because if women find it safe to temporarily leave their work, they will find it safer to have children. The employment will increase and the unemployment will decrease. The example of a learning parent will positively shape the attitude of the children to studying and will improve the cultural capital of the family.

For the experts dealing with higher education and andragogy, an important result of the research on studying during the period of bringing up a child or more children is the fact that young women living an inactive period and being exposed to a low level of intellectual challenge are characterized by a high degree of primary motivation. The primary elements of motivation to start learning (love of studying, professional interest etc.) may serve as a good foundation for further studies, and for creating the demand and need of the individual for permanent studying.

The re-integration of women into the labour market after a maternity leave during which they have accomplished a successful training course is an important result for the decision-makers of the business world as it positively influences the economic activity of the population through increasing employment, reducing the number of unemployed people, also reduces hidden unemployment, as it is not necessary to maintain the status of forced inactivity. As a result of the successfully completed training courses, labour market will receive professionally competent employees. The highest proportion of the respondents found that the most positive effects of learning were the better chances of re-entering the labour market and the proper maintenance of knowledge and skills. It is necessary to launch new research programmes in order to examine the research questions. One of the possible directions of further research is following the career of women who have graduated during the maternity leave. The objective of such a monitoring project might reveal further returns of the educational investment. An even longer term research is required to monitor the generational transfer in the families concerned.

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