

DISTANT STUDENTS' SATISFACTION AS AN INDICATOR OF INSTITUTIONAL SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

INDICATORS AND EXPLANATIONS BASED ON DATA FROM HUNGARIAN SURVEY

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ABSTRACT

In Higher Education correspondence courses have an important role beside the state funded (full-time) courses¹ in Hungary. These students usually learn while working and this study complement or supplement the previous student path. Higher education institutions are competing for correspondence students and satisfaction of these students has special significance. However, researches have pointed that the satisfaction depends not only on the quality of services but also on the commitment of the students (Rautopuro–Vaisanen, 2000). Satisfaction depends on several factors (e.g., on expectations, on preliminary considerations), according to Bean és Bradley (1986) it means emotional stance in fact, what is associated with isolation and dissatisfaction in case of fulltime students. Several international and also some Hungarian researches confirmed the connection between the dissatisfaction and not-embeddedness of students (Pusztai, 2011). In the research project *Learning Regions in Hungary: From Theories to Realities* we asked part-time students in three dominant higher education institutions (N=1092). In our research we examined this questions in the case of part-time students: what is the connection between the motivation or commitment and achievement, what kind of demands and requests turn the correspondence student to the actors of Higher Education.

1. INDICATORS OF STUDENT SUCCESS AND SATISFACTION

The increased social interest in higher education and the competition for dwindling resources have set the focus of attention on the issue of comparing institutional performance and productivity. A crucial question is the development of students during their years of studies and how the institute contributes to their success. This is especially important if we take into consideration the internal diversity of the institutional system and the institutes themselves, along with the heterogenic trend of student societies. In order to get a grasp of development, we need to identify the acceptable indicators of success.

Szczepanski already formulated in his classic high education sociology that grasping the term of student success is not an easy task (Szczepanski 1974). When examining this phenomenon, we are faced with a host of dilemmas: is a standardised measurement system viable, or is it the particular institutions, or – even so – individual students that provide a valid definition of their own concept of success? Should we base ourselves upon objective data, or on the perception of success? An important question is which segment of time is appropriate for registering success; is it the time of completing one's studies – or rather, years later? And can student achievement be grasped in a positive or negative direction? Is it considered an achievement if one does not simply drop out? Or to take all of one's exams without failing even one? Or to stand by the same institute? Another issue often debated is whether success should be rated within the reference system of higher education, or should we consider external reference systems instead (Pusztai 2011).

External indicators include getting a job, job competency, possessing the work attitude sought after by employers; however, education research takes over the internationally accepted indicators of success on the labour market without reflection (Kun-Polónyi 2013, Varga 2013, Pusztai 2014a). In research, employee or professional success is generally represented by external factors such as income and employment, or whether the job matches the qualification of the person concerned; internal factors, on the other hand, are less frequently considered – such as whether the expectations of alumni are met. Certainly, job competency is also hard to track from the employer's side. The basic principle of the human capital theory is that education and success on the

¹ The empirical part of the study is made up of the research named *Learning Regions in Hungary: From Theories to Realities* (2011-2014), OTKA (K-101867). The research was led by Prof. Dr. Tamás Kozma.

labour market stand together (Schultz 1961); however, the predictors referring to the job competency of future experts are still unexposed. Research shows that having a degree or diploma and its rating does not by itself correlate to the individual's performance at the workplace (Kun 2013). Some economists tie the increase in productivity to possessing a degree as a document, but this explains only a part of the sheepskin-effect. Research aimed at measuring work efficiency determines value orientations, dispositions and attitudes as predictors of success in this field: suitability for full-fledged role fulfilment, sense of profession, taking responsibility for both the closer and broader social environment, operosity, self-discipline and the capability for co-operation, planning and leadership (Knox et al. 1993, Hirschi–Fischer 2013, Pusztai 2014b).

Other models, however, approach the issue of students' efficiency not from the aspect of job competency, but rather from either that of social cohesion or the complex term of quality of life. These consider not only economic, but also social and ethical ranges of interpretation (Camara–Kimmel 2005, Heuser 2007), which also allow for the deduction of the internal indicators of students' efficiency that can be interpreted within the educational system. This involves engagements as a citizen, social responsibility and service for the community, which has a recognised position in measuring the success of higher education (Pascarella–Terenzini 2005). Research has shown that these have a positive relation with professional identity and leadership capabilities (Smart et al. 2000).

It seems that lately, the interest of researchers has shifted more to searching for the teaching-learning oriented indicators, due to the uncertain availability, debated validity and low reliability of external indicators. However, the set of dimensions to be examined has expanded substantially; apart from learning-teaching results, several other predictors have been found that forecast future efficiency. Out of these, the following are measured: capabilities that presumably support the realisation of successful behaviour after leaving higher education (social and citizen competency); or performance, that is, cross-sectional or longitudinal (during the years spent in higher education) changes in activities that become habitual, as well as attitudes and opinions that merge into views.

For the sake of perspicuity, researches classify indicators as affective-psychological and as affective-behavioural dimensions (Astin 1993, Pascarella–Terenzini 2005). If they intend to research students' experience, existing practices or related opinions in the fields of co-operation in a multi-national environment or social problem-solving, then they analyse the statistics of questionnaire data; and if they compare the related internal condition systems, knowledge and capabilities of students either to one another or to pre-set criteria, then they employ psychometrical tools. In this way, they regard a certain level of, or a significant shift in, the competence measured as efficient.

While the methods monitoring job competency are predominantly widespread in Europe, and there is no consensus as to whether learning performance can correspond to professional capacities that can be mobilised outside of laboratory conditions, the majority of the highly successful students' efficiency concepts prevailing Overseas are competence-based (Klein et al. 2005). Astin's taxonomy identifies them as cognitive-psychological type indicators of efficiency. Efficiency means a relevant change in capabilities that can be measured using standardised tools (Klein et al. 2005).

Astin's taxonomy regards the success achieved in studies – based on self-confession – as a part of the cognitive-behavioural dimension. If advancement in learning gets in the centre of attention, then successful admission to the levels of higher education in accord with personal career plans, progression through the different educational levels, learning and institutional continuity, the average of grades in terms of the individual or that of aggregates, attaining a degree, commitment to studies and student work according to academic norms can all be regarded as efficient (Klein et al. 2005, Pascarella–Terenzini 2005, Tinto 2006, Banta–Pike 2007).

A peculiarity of the education system is that it measures performance in points and grades. Therefore, it should be obvious to regard entry points as input data and the qualification of the degree as output data. A lot of research operates based on the qualification of the degree or on grade point average. These average grades are represented in analyses both as objective indicators and – in order to avoid the use of different assessment standards – as grade point average compared to the rest of the students in the institution or faculty (Pusztai 2011, Veroszta 2013). Another accepted indicator of efficiency is the progress through educational levels, although this is not independent from the possibilities available in the institution or region, the field and form of the training concerned; moreover, there are differences between plans and actual level progression (Schomburg–Teichler 2011, Pusztai 2011, Veroszta 2013).

Less objective efficiency indicators include commitment to learning, which in the narrow sense refers to resolute and value-oriented participation in learning; in the broader sense, it refers to active inclusion in the learning environment. Further subjective indicators of learning efficiency include choosing studies in compliance with the person concerned, their view regarding involvement, the goal set to attain a degree and persistence with the selected institution (Bean–Bradley 1986, Tinto 1993, Thomas 2000, Rautopuro–Väisänen 2002).

Surveys employing the viewpoint of organisational research establish a connection between student satisfaction and student efficiency. In the course of a student satisfaction survey, where satisfaction was regarded as an indicator of quality, it was ascertained – even though both the definition of quality and the identification of the actual consumer is questionable – that statements made by students about themselves can be viewed as valid

and reliable indicators. These researchers insist that students are indeed competent when creating an image of themselves, their opinions cannot be questioned, although they cannot rank the standard of educational content (Rautopuro–Vaisanen 2000). Students attending the same institution perceive differently not only the subjective institutional characteristics (requirements, communication), but the objective ones as well. Therefore, the real question is why these factors have a greater impact on some students than on others. Satisfaction is a very soft term, the meaning of which is influenced by several factors: preliminary considerations, expectations, points of reference – and in fact, this refers to an emotional stance (Bean–Bradley 1986). According to research, dissatisfaction often goes together with a lack of integration, isolation, and the impression of inadequate adaptation to the institution, the scarcity of friends and perceiving the amount of social support as too little (Bean–Bradley 1986).

These results drew attention to the fact that higher education institutions are able to most effectively support the development and progression of students not through various structural and infrastructural factors – which have proven to be mediatory variables only –, but rather through the interactive field they project around themselves (Pascarella-Terenzini 2005). Tinto (1993) regarded the integration of students into the institutional society as a very powerful predictor. In his encompassing model, he analysed the process of joining formal, learning-related and informal, social systems and asserted that integration into these systems affects performance in such a manner that consequently, students break away from the forces attracting them away from the world of higher education and through frequent interactions, they conform to the forces attracting them to higher education. While the relationship integration of students improves, their commitment to learning goals and the institution also increases, all of which has a beneficial effect on performance. Lack of integration, on the other hand, leads to marginalisation and eventually to joining a different institute, or to complete dropout.

2. THE LEARNING REGIONS RESEARCH

The research entitled *Learning Regions in Hungary: From Theories to Realities* examines the various ways of learning (formal, informal, personal, social learning). One of the pillars of the research is formal learning; within this category, we deal with non-traditional students taking part in higher education, in the framework of which we surveyed adult students. The qualitative and quantitative survey was carried out in three major higher educational institutions located in the Észak-Alföld region, in 2013. The questionnaire-based survey was prepared with the help of structured interviews in the three participating institutions – the University of Debrecen (UD), the College of Nyíregyháza (CNY) and the College of Szolnok. All part-time students participated in the questionnaire survey, and the number of filled-out forms returned was 1092.

In the following, we examine the relation between students' satisfaction and their efficiency, trying to find an interrelation between the approach to studying in higher education, the students' attitude, the learning environment and the performance of students. We also seek an answer to the question whether there is a connection between the institutional integration of part-time students and their learning efficiency.

In order to find the connections between efficiency and satisfaction, we created an efficiency indicator. On the one hand, this efficiency indicator was made up of items making objective assessment possible, such as the average of grades acquired in the last semester, foreign language skills and having a language exam. On the other hand, it also included variables connected to the students' relation to learning and learning motivation, based on the subjective opinion of students. (For example: motivation expressed on a 100-point grade, how often they attend lectures, the rate of activity at seminars, how thoroughly they prepare for exams, etc.) Based on the established efficiency indicator based on 14 items, we allocated the project participants into three groups. The group containing students with above-average motivation was named 'very successful student group'. This comprises 30% of the participants. 45% of the students belong to the 'average' category, while a quarter of all students involved make up the 'less successful' group.

The groups formed on the basis of efficiency show connections of variable strength with demographic background variables. Most of the women (79%) belong to the 'very successful' group, with only 21% of the men in this category; however, 45% of the men belong to the 'less successful' category ($p=0.000$). The educational background is not so determinant, although some of the more successful students graduated from secondary grammar schools and went on to higher education right after their GCSEs. Interestingly, the educational background of parents does not significantly influence the classification of students; the qualification of spouses is not determinant, either. The usual settlement slope also fails to show up, as there are more successful students coming from small towns, than students living in big cities, for example.

Therefore, the groups do not tightly correlate with origin background variables, yet the own family background is all the more determinant. Half of those belonging in the 'very successful' group are married, while singles generally perform worse than those living together with a spouse. ($p=0.001$) 53% of those with the best results raise a child, while 72% of less successful students are single ($p=0.000$). Efficiency is positively influenced by the number of children raised; nearly half of those coming from a big family are amongst the very

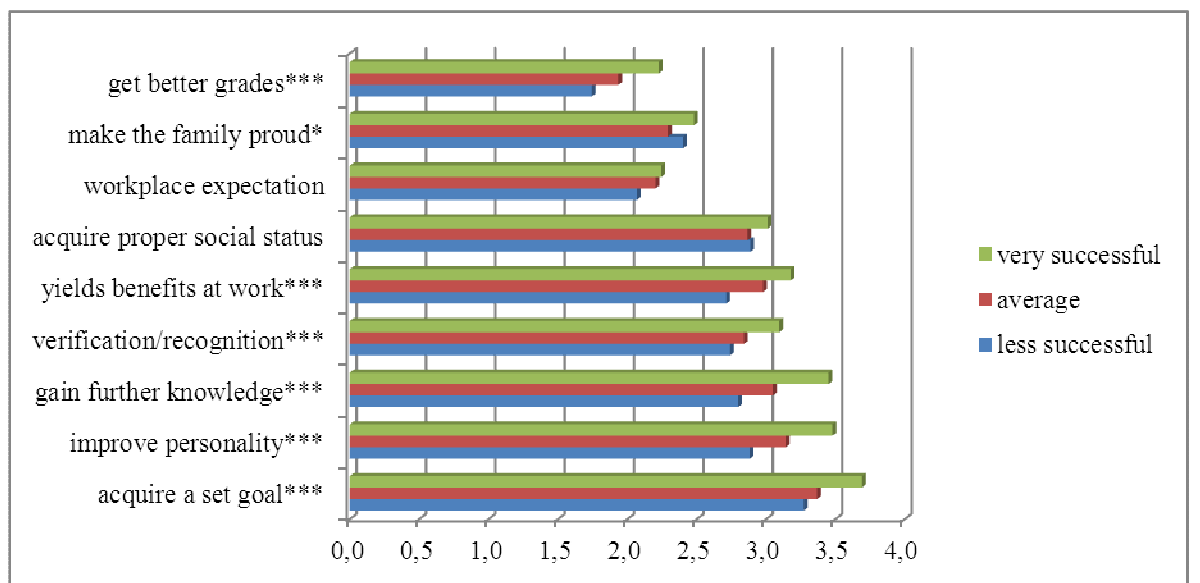
successful students, while more than a third of those with one or two children belong to the same category ($p=0.002$).

2.1 Interrelations between the efficiency and satisfaction of adult students

Even though the factors that play a role in pursuing studies in higher education are not directly related to student satisfaction, they can nonetheless refer to the nature and extent of the learning attitude, which in turn could influence the feeling of satisfaction. Among the motives influencing the decision to pursue studies in higher education in adulthood, inner motivations play a definitive role: interest in a particular major or minor, keeping mental capacities in top form, the need to acquire further knowledge, the love of learning, enhancing and developing existing knowledge. All of these increase in direct proportion with the extent of success ($p=0.000$). There is an inverse proportion in case of external motives, as students who learn in order to advance at the workplace, to get a degree or due to parental encouragement mostly belong to the 'less successful' category ($p=0.000$).

The factors experienced during studies in higher education form a similar pattern (Figure 1). We asked the students to rate to what extent certain factors encourage them in the current learning process. Comparing the averages of incentives rated on a scale of 1-4 reveals that the most successful students still display a strong set of primary motives. They value the knowledge gained as highly important from the aspects of perseverance, self-verification and usefulness. The three groups converge more closely to one another in respect of the secondary motives: workplace expectations, acquiring social status and recognition from the family.

Figure 1. Learning motives according to efficiency groups, average



*** $p=0.000$ ** $p=0.04$

It can be seen that both the road leading to studying in higher education and a favourable attitude during the studies are characteristics of the more successful students. The same hold true for learning-related plans: the more successful the student is, the greater the willingness for permanent self-training. 35% of very successful students plan to continue their studies in higher education; the same is true for 27% of their less successful peers ($p=0.04$). A similar ratio increase can be observed regarding the need for participation in educational instruction and OKJ trainings, as well as other forms of learning. Taking part in workplace trainings either before, or parallel to studying in higher education shows a similar trend: 37% of the less successful students, 42% of average students and 46% of very successful students participate in adult training activities.

Therefore, it seems that the set of motives brought along when entering higher education also has a determinant role during one's studies, and the incentive power shown in both stages is in close interrelation with efficiency. We have managed to verify the meaning of committal to studies: enduring diligence, the internal and external utilisation of knowledge and the determined broadening of knowledge speak of value orientation. The

question we intend to pose is whether a broader sense of committal - that is, the active integration of students in the study environment – shows a similar connection in terms of efficiency.

2.2 Student relations in light of efficiency

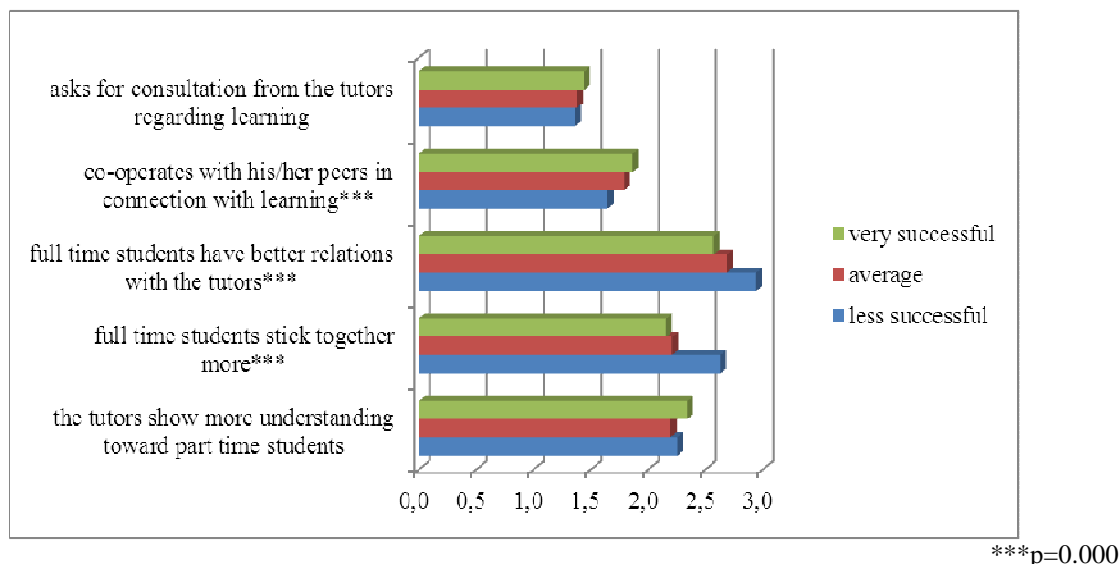
In the following, we selected the variables of the questionnaire that refer to the relations formed in the higher education environment (Figure 2). Less successful students believe that full time students enjoy a more favourable system of relations because they meet in their common space more often and more intensively. The other two groups share this feeling to a lesser extent only (the average mark is 2.2 on a scale of 1-4). At the same time, students belonging to the very successful and average groups sense a more effective co-operation among themselves, and not only in relation to full time students. It is true, however, that they too give a low mark (the average being 1.6-1.8), yet this is significantly higher than in the case of their less successful peers. They would be happy to change this: when examining the section of the questionnaire concerning needs, it is revealed that the need for keeping contact with peers is the highest in the case of less successful students, while being equally important for the other two groups ($p=0.000$).

Regarding the connection between students and their tutors, Figure 2 draws our attention to similar results. Once again, less successful students tend to agree that there is better collaboration between full time students. However, the intention to change this does not appear here, as they have the lowest need for more frequent consultations.

Therefore, the positive relationship between efficiency and the learning environment seems to be verified. This is further augmented by the fact that the more successful students are, the more they perceive that correspondence students are more determined and purposive ($p=0.000$), despite the fact that the requirements are the same as in full time training (the judgement of the requirements increases with efficiency, $p=0.015$).

All three groups agree to the same extent that for part time students, learning poses a bigger burden. They think to a similar extent that it is difficult to perform well besides work and family. Apart from exhibiting the connection between learning attitude and efficiency, we deem it necessary to outline the problems related to learning in order to get a more complete image about student satisfaction.

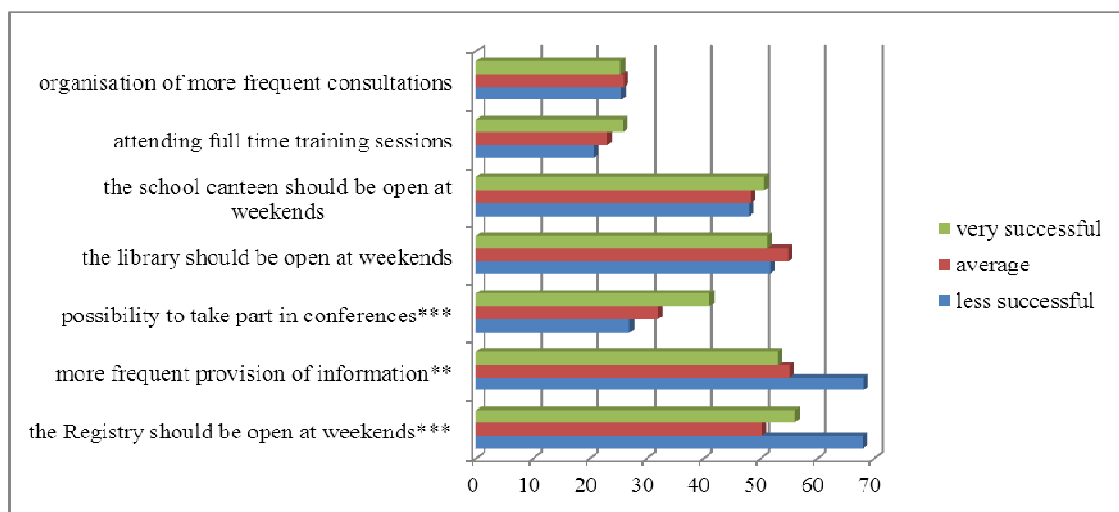
Figure 2. Assessing the relations of students according to efficiency, average



2.3 Factors having an adverse effect on learning

We listed several adverse effects in the questionnaire that could influence learning performance. The problems associated with learning affect the most successful students the least, in comparison with the members of the other two groups. Less successful students generally face obstacles that match the practice of higher educational institutions: like the handling of issues related to studies or the procurement of books; however, absence from the workplace, getting study leave, participating in consultations, harmonising travelling or family life with one's studies are also frequent problems.

Figure 3. The needs arising during studies according to efficiency, average



***p=0,000

We offered some possibilities to the students who filled out the questionnaire, which are supposed to help them continue their studies efficiently, as well as assist in their integration. Figure 3 shows that less successful and average students would require a more flexible institutional practice, such as: access to the Registry and the library, as well as the modernisation of information flow. Successful students are less dissatisfied with these, as they would rather have the same opportunities as full time students: the option to attend full time training and to participate in conferences and vocational events. Another way to put all of this is to say that the qualitative criterion regarding the contents of the training increases jointly with the increase in efficiency; while as efficiency drops, the expectations concerning the environmental conditions of learning become more pronounced.

3. CONCLUSION

In the framework of our regional research, we examined the part time students of higher educational institutions, analysing the connections between success and satisfaction. When establishing the success-based groups, we saw that in case of adult students, the origin effect seems to wane, while the actual private life background increases its effect. For example, stable and lasting relationship, the existence and number of children all have a positive impact on learning efficiency. This is to say that the narrowest personal learning environment greatly influences learning performance in adults. A similar effect can be observed with regard to the broader student environment: successful students are more effective at forming a bond with entities of the higher educational institution. Those who perform better maintain a more intense connection with their tutors and peers alike.

More favourable integration, however, also shows a strong interrelation with the attitude to learning. Successful students arrive in higher education with a strong motivational set and continue to be driven by them in the course of their studies. Their needs concerning higher education are focused on quality training and require modifying its contents. Less successful students, on the other hand, are affected by external motives, with their expectations and dissatisfaction concentrated on the structure and circumstances of training.

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