

ÁGNES ENGLER:

**THE ATTITUDE OF MEN AND WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION
TOWARDS LIFE-LONG LEARNING**

Our study is an attempt to survey the characteristics of life-long learning among young adults studying in higher education, taking into consideration the gender of the individuals involved in the study.¹ For a long time, gender differences in life-long learning manifested primarily in issues of equal opportunities. Such an issue was the alteration of the basically masculine curricula of the courses that opened up for women or the launching courses in jobs in which women were formerly underrepresented (Oglesby et al. 1989). Consequently, more and more women joined higher education in a wide range of fields. The intense activity of women in education is observed in the whole of Europe. In the northern countries of the continent, where education traditionally plays an important role in society, women have an edge of 10–15% over male students (Europe in figures 2011). In the member states of the European Union, women are overrepresented in higher education; there is an average of 124 women to 100 male students (Key Data on Education in Europe 2012). Increasing one's knowledge in the academic sphere is only possible through an effective cooperation of all the stakeholders in higher education (Heuser 2007), but the institutions of higher education may also be involved in meeting the increasing demand of society for knowledge and permanent learning (Kulich 1987).

According to the findings of a nationwide survey, Hungarian men with a lower qualification tend to prefer formal education to a lesser degree than women do. 20% of men with a vocational education return to school, whereas 30% of women with a similar qualification choose to start learning again (Csernyák et al. 2004, 28). 65% of men with a GCSE return to school, and the respective figure in the case of women is 55%. 20% of people with a college or university degree continue their studies, and the figure is the same at both genders. Men in permanent employment enter further training courses in lower numbers than women (18% of men and 22% of women). On the other hand, unemployed men choose further education in higher education than unemployed women (32% of men and 29% of women respectively).

Decisions made during one's life in school largely influence the shaping of the individual's attitude to education. The experience gathered during school years and the attitude of the students' family towards learning represent important elements of the person's attitude towards education (see, among others, Bourdieu 1986, De Graaf 1986 & Pusztai 2004). During a students' career in school, an important milestone is the decision regarding further education at the end of the secondary school. When students consider the idea of further training at the end of the grammar school, their decision is usually influenced by their parents. A number of research findings suggest that highly qualified parents encourage their children to choose a classic academic career, whereas parents with lower qualifications want their children to obtain a trade, as they are reluctant to undertake the risks of long-term investment into education (Boudon 1998). Deviation from the classic academic career is more common among men, as traditional gender roles so require. The research conducted by Fényes (2010) in respect to higher education clearly demonstrated the disadvantage of men, with special attention to the lower degree of social mobility of men.

The differences between men and women in terms of schooling have several reasons. DiMaggio (1998) attributes the different performance of boys and girls to gender socialization processes. Boys directed towards cultural mobility are career-biased, whereas girls often reproduce their

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cultural capital in marriage. Leathwood (2006) examined the characteristics of successful and independent adult students. These students are usually men, in possession of masculine attributes, such as purpose- and success-bias and ambition. Female students, on the other hand, require consultation and guidance even when they are grown up.

In our earlier nationwide survey we did not find any significant gender differences in terms of the performance and success of adults in higher education (Engler 2012). The performance indicators were similar, suggesting highly similar results of, and commitment to learning in both sexes. It seems that the differences, still tangible in public education and higher education, vanish in adult education. In the continuation of the survey, we wish to follow the educational career of young adults in order to chart their approaches to permanent learning and the differences between male and female attitudes.

In the course of our analysis, we proceed in a chronological order, following the careers of the students involved in the survey. First we use all the available relevant data so as to analyse the circumstances of the individual's starting advanced studies, the mechanisms of making a decision about commencing studies. The in-progress phase of advanced studies is examined with a set of variables that are closely connected to the individual's attitude towards learning, to the demand and need of knowledge acquisition and skills. These are the factors that largely determine–reinforce or weaken–a person's desire for life-long learning. After an analysis of the educational past and present of the respondents, we focussed on their plans regarding their future, the appearance of the need for permanent learning at the two sexes.

DECISION MAKING MECHANISMS AND CIRCUMSTANCES OF STARTING FURTHER EDUCATION

The majority of the 1471 respondents involved in the pool of the HERD-research are women (69%), so the proportion of men is below one third (31%). The demographic characteristic features of these students were, from a social gender aspect, not very different; only the education of the parents ($r=-0.084$ and 0.077 , $p=0.005$, $p=0.002$) and the father's economic activity ($r=0.056$, $p=0.045$) correlated with the gender. The parents of men have higher qualifications, especially their mothers. 44% of the mothers of male students had a college or university degree or advanced academic degree, whereas the respective figure was 35% in the case of the female students. The difference was much smaller regarding the fathers: 30% as opposed to 26%. At the time of making the inventory, 75% of the male students' fathers and 80% of their mothers worked actively. In this respect, there was no difference between the fathers and mothers of female students (80%).

The social background of the students did not provide any clue as to the students' attitudes of towards learning. Our hypothesis is therefore based upon the learning activities and practice of female students, using educational statistics and gender approaches. It is assumed that the advantageous attitude of women involved in various forms of learning appears in higher education as well, and their participation in adult education is predictable with certainty.

The overwhelming majority (85%) of the respondents did not suspend their studies after secondary school, as 86% of the women and 82% of the men started college or university right after completing their secondary education. Students largely followed the traditional academic career; 65% of them graduated grammar schools. In accordance with the earlier observations, secondary schools offering vocational training (vocational secondary schools, technological secondary schools) are preferred by men, as 27% of them came from such schools, as opposed to 17% of the women ($p=0.000$). 20% of the students who did not directly continue their studies after secondary school found a job, only 6% of them registered as job seekers. It is important to note that during the time of formal education missed, men were more active (45% of them attended some training course), and only one third of the women did the same after secondary school ($p=0.046$).

Entirely different is the answer that we received to our question aimed at imaginary situations in the future: “*What would you do if you couldn’t find a suitable job in a few months?*” In this case, women appear to be more willing to learn, as 35% of them are sure that they would start a course in higher education, while the respective figure in the case of men is only 8% ($p=0.000$). Men would rather wait and continue seeking a job (37%, women 29%), or would go abroad (this is an attractive idea for women too, as 25% of them would do the same, hardly behind the 28% of men). These data suggest that in a real-life situation men are more active when it comes to permanent learning, while women will only accept the need for permanent studying in theory.

In an analysis of the attitude of people towards learning, an important element is the system of motivation leading to the beginning of studies. The system of motivation is summed up in Table 1. The respondents opted for a very powerful internal urge to improve their knowledge at the top of the list of priorities. If all the answers are true and honest, this internal urge proves itself an excellent basis for studying in higher education. Although, the need to improve their knowledge, as a motivation, was found to be somewhat more powerful in the case of women, their edge was smaller than we had expected.

Table 1: Motivation factors to pursue advanced studies, in a breakdown according to the genders in percent

	Total	Men	Women
Improving knowledge*	92.0	89.8	93.8
It is easier to find a job with a degree	84.2	82.5	84.7
Well-paid occupation**	78.8	83.3	76.3
Respectable job	76.6	75.6	76.6
Improving social relationships	61.5	60.4	61.3
There was no tuition fee	60.7	63.3	60.0
Wanted a leading position***	53.5	63.7	48.7
Was able to afford financially	44.6	45.6	44.3
Encouragement from parents, teachers	34.4	34.0	35.0
Following family traditions	33.2	33.1	32.6
Did not want to work	30.6	32.0	29.5
Following the example of friends*	24.1	27.6	22.4
N	1350	405	945

* $p<0,05$ ** $p<0,01$ *** $p<0,001$

Source: HERD database 2012, Count=1350

The next set of motivating factors related to the labour market (*finding a job, income, prestige*), and the influence of the environment (*parents, friends and teachers*) appears to be less important. As for the secondary factors of motivation, the men in the group had very high expectations of a higher salary and a chance for occupying a leading position. This preliminary expectation may be rooted in the tendencies of the labour market, since male employees have had a higher salary for decades (Galasi 2000), whereas vertical segregation has kept women at the lower and middle levels of employment hierarchy (Nagy 2001). Income and position are important motivating factors among men studying as adults, but they also pay attention to the potential network of connections to be created (Engler Ibid.). In higher education the connections as a motivating factor have not been observed. It is likely that the experience gained in the world of work makes adult learners aware of the importance of personal-professional connections, but day students do not yet recognize the value of such connections.

At the bottom line of motivations there are those coming from people in the students’ environment. Our hypothesis ascribed great significance to the family background, but only one

third of the respondents found it important in their decision regarding higher education. But if we suppose that the parents, rather than the teachers, stand behind the remaining 34%, the parental guidance may play a more important role than it was originally assumed.

Therefore, we experienced no considerable differences in the preliminaries of the advanced studies, which is probably because of the similar social backgrounds. For the further examination of the male and female students' attitude we selected variables that measure the demand to obtain more knowledge, the efficiency of learning, honest work, and efficient activity in an academic environment.

ATTITUDE TO LEARNING IN ADVANCED STUDIES

During the college or university years the attitude of the individual towards learning may change in a positive or in a negative way. But we are not able to measure those changes with the means of research applied in our project. It is, however, possible to judge the individual's personal investment into learning, the working morale in the institution of higher education, through the questions we ask about the process and results of learning. The desire to obtain more knowledge is indispensable for developing and sustaining the desire for life-long learning (Memorandum 2000).

We begin the analysis of the students' commitment to learning in a breakdown according to genders, by requesting the respondents' personal opinion. Table 2 contains statements relevant to advanced studies. We registered the answers of the students who fully or largely agreed with the statements. The powerful internal motivation experienced earlier has been further reinforced by the strong commitment and perseverance of the students, motivating them to do quality work (*good results, active participation*) and to expect a return of their investment (*completion of their studies, utilizing the knowledge gained*).

Table 2: Students' attitude (in percent) towards advanced studies
in a breakdown according to gender
(The Proportion of Respondents who fully or largely agree with the Statement)

	Total	Men	Women
I would like to perform as well as possible***	89.1	82.6	91.9
I am very determined to complete my studies***	88.5	84.4	90.2
My studies will be useful for my professional career	81.8	79.0	83.0
I do my best to be able to attend the classes***	78.6	69.2	82.8
N	1374	420	954

***p<0,001

Source: HERD database 2012, Count=1374

Although no considerable difference was observed between genders at the beginning of the studies, their attitudes towards studying were far from being the same. Both genders, in a similar proportion, believe that they will be able to utilize their new knowledge and competences in the labour market (79% vs. 83%). Both genders have great expectations regarding the return of their investment in learning, but the types of the investment they make, in terms of time and energy, are significantly different.

The responses suggest that women are more determined, and not only achieving their goal is important for them, but also the ability to perform quality work. 83% of them assert that they do their best to attend the classes in order to perform as well as possible, whereas 70% of the men answered similarly. This result is confirmed by the answers received to a question in a different

segment of the questionnaire, where 88% of the women claimed that they did the utmost effort in order to attend the classes under all circumstances, as opposed to 79% of the men ($p=0.000$). Active participation in the classes is an important part of the learning process, it is therefore advisable to examine whether the attendance of the lessons means a transfer of knowledge at the same time as well.

In the set of questions aimed at the circumstances of learning we used a four-grade scale to evaluate the attention of the students at the classes. The results on the scale suggest that women are more attentive at the seminars ($p=0.001$). Learning outside the classroom is also important in surveying the attitude of students to studying. In another set of questions we intended to obtain data as to how many hours a day students spend preparing for their classes. We identified considerable differences between men and women in terms of the period they spent preparing ($p=0.000$). 24% of the women spend more than three hours/day learning. Only 14% of the men devoted the same amount of time to learning. At the opposite end of the scale, the respondents were able to choose "less than half an hour" as time spent learning. Only 7% of the women chose that option, and 14% of the men did the same. The number of successful exams was used as an indicator of regular learning and preparation. Female students scored better, as 58% of them passed their exams at the first attempt. On the other hand, only 38% of the men were successful at the first attempt; they were more willing to postpone an exam or two ($p=0.000$).

It appears therefore, that female students are characterised by determination and commitment to a larger extent. This assumption is underpinned by other answers we received on a four-grade scale. According to the findings, more women than men submitted their essays in due time ($p=0.000$), and the women were willing to settle down to learn even when they had some other, more interesting thing to do ($p=0.003$). Women prepared for their exams more regularly than did the men ($p=0.000$). Women's commitment is illustrated by the fact that they find it less likely to fail in some courses ($p=0.000$) or semesters ($p=0.002$), or terminate their studies entirely before graduation. The variables measuring the resources invested in studying—the time devoted to learning, the class attendance and meeting the output criteria—all indicate that women are doing better in adult higher education courses.

Although the motivation leading to higher education is the same for both genders, we find considerably different attitudes during the actual period of learning. Men appear to be less determined and active, and they treat learning requirements and tasks more leniently. In the following part of the research we examine whether the gender-specific learning attitudes remain the same in life-long learning as well.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LIFE-LONG LEARNING

Eighty five per cent of the students plan to continue the advanced studies after obtaining a diploma. In that respect, there is no difference between genders: half of the male and female students intend to earn another degree. 5% of them wish to have another BA, 25% have a master's degree in mind, and 30% of the men and 28% of the women would like to start doctoral studies. As it has been pointed out before, the students believe that they will be able to utilize their knowledge in their professional career. One of the questions asked during the empirical questionnaire was this one: *"If you are unable to find a job with your current qualification, would you be ready to attend various adult education courses or trainings?"* (Table 3)

Table 3: Students' willingness (percent) to attend adult training courses, in a breakdown according to gender

	Total	Men	Women
Unwilling to enter a course	10.4	17.7	7.3
Willing to enter, if that would considerably and shortly improve their position in the labour market	51.5	46.9	53.5
Willing to enter, if not too strenuous	12.9	12.2	13.2
Certainly willing	17.2	14.2	18.5
Not certain about the issue	7.9	9.0	7.5
N	1324	401	923

p<0.001

Source: HERD database 2012, Count=1324

Ten per cent of the students are certain they do not intend to undertake a further training course in order to improve their chances of integration in the labour market.

However, the overwhelming majority of the respondents claim that they are determined to invest in their human capital if they are unable to find a job (82%). Some of them do not set up any condition for that (17.2%), whereas others make it dependent on certain circumstances (*not very strenuous*) and a fast return of the investment (*considerably and shortly improve their position in the labour market*). The latter is a condition that is present at half of the students, superseding our preliminary expectation as to which a powerful internal motivation is a persisting attitude all through one's educational career.

Let us remember that the question refers to a fictitious situation, examining the intention of the individuals to learn when they are, according to the assumption, unemployed. Our original expectation is that learning is in the centre of the thinking of young professionals, especially when it comes to improving one's chances in the labour market. It is especially important in the case of those who are about to start their career, as they constitute one of the most sensitive groups of the job seekers.

The division according to gender calls our attention to significant differences. Although, the unconditional willingness to learn is present among women to a much larger degree (19% vs. 14%), they also have more powerful expectations of a return. 47% of the men and 54% of the women are only willing to learn if there is a rapid and tangible return. Statistical data suggest that women, when they lose their job, will find another one much later than the men (Nagy 2000). We are also aware that there are tendencies in the labour market that adversely affect women; such are negative discrimination, vertical and horizontal segregation and lower wages. As these circumstances are well-known to the general public, we expected women to be more committed to the permanent improvement of their competences. The results are, however, in accordance with the statistical data: one third of the men participate in adult education courses, and 29% of women do the same. In inactive groups the differences are larger: 40% of the men and a mere 16% of the women learn in a formal or informal way (Csernyák 2004 p.28).

The previous question was aimed at an imaginary situation, but the data in Table 4 summarize some of the factors that influence students in their decisions regarding higher education. At the beginning of the survey, among the factors of motivation leading to higher education we found that internal motivation (improving one's knowledge) prevailed over considerations regarding the labour market. Later, when students are closer to the world of labour, the order is reversed, and the primary motivation (professional progress, new knowledge) is in the background, in the perspectives of the adult learner.

Table 4: Factors influencing the participation of men and women in adult education (%)

	Total	Men	Women
Improving chances in the labour market***	64.5	56.0	68.4
Size of financial investment required*	51.2	47.2	53.0
Professional progress	50.6	49.1	51.3
Necessary amount of time	32.3	34.6	31.2
Chances of acquiring new knowledge**	23.2	18.8	25.1
New professional relations**	21.5	17.4	23.3
N	1416	436	980

*p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

Source: HERD database 2012, Count=1416

Women and men are willing to make different investments in education at an adult age; women are over-represented in almost every aspect. The most conspicuous difference is in connection with the ideas concerning the chances of finding a job (68% vs. 56%). The information that an envisaged return of the investment (finding a job more easily, obtaining a more advantageous position) increases the likelihood of investing into studying is now added to the female attitude towards learning, outlined above.

The attitude of men towards learning is more balanced and less dependent on the size of the investment or on the way of the return. It is interesting to note that in our survey establishing new professional connections during studying is not a priority for men. Earlier research projects have, however, indicated that men value professional connections, and find such relationships to be an important asset in studying in higher education (Albert & Nagy 1999). In the case of the adult learners in higher education, men find professional relationships important, whereas women prefer social connections and friendship (Engler 2012). The findings suggest that men also tend to spend less time studying. Earlier we have seen that the actual, physical time they devote to learning and the quality of time spent learning (as measured by their results) are both less than the time women devote to learning. The issue of time is also important when the individual makes a decision about beginning to study at an adult age.

CONCLUSION

In the survey we intended to map the attitude of college and university students to life-long learning. We focused on three moments in the educational career of the respondents: the transition from secondary to higher education, their period of studies in higher education, and their plans for their future. The results reflect that students with a powerful initial primary motivation give up some of their original desire in order to gain more academic knowledge during their way to becoming professionals. Their interest is diverted towards marketable skills and competences.

When analysing the empirical data, we observed different learning strategies between men and women. During their career in higher education, women were characterised by a permanently high primary motivation, they were very much aware of their qualitative and quantitative investment into education. It is indicated by the higher number of contact classes they attended, adequate performance at the lessons, and more successful examinations. Men, on the other hand, appeared to be less motivated and committed. During their studies, they concentrated on learning to a lesser degree than women did. Despite the smaller investment they expected a higher return of higher education, as they wanted higher income and prestige upon receiving a degree.

As the course of learning stretches, however, the motivation of women tends to subside. They make further learning a subject of several conditions, and each element of their investment (time, money etc.) will be more decisive for them than it is for men. Intrinsic motivation continues to be more powerful for women at that stage of learning as well (professional development, acquisition of new knowledge), but their decision making strategy related to learning will become more complex, even under exceptional circumstances (unemployment). Our initial hypothesis has therefore been justified. The attitude of women to studying is more favourable during their years in higher education, but their willingness to be involved in life-long learning appears to be diminishing with time. Men's commitment to learning is not as powerful as that of the women during their career in higher education, but they are not so keen on a prompt return when they consider the idea of further studies.

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