

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The attitudes of young citizens in higher education towards universal basic income in the context of automation—A qualitative study

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Abstract

One of the primary reasons for introducing the discussion about universal basic income (UBI) into political debate was to understand whether UBI could serve a good response to the negative consequences of technology-driven job replacement. It is also a question whether citizens would accept UBI. Based on 30 interviews with Hungarian university students, we investigate the attitudes of young citizens to the introduction of UBI in a hypothetical scenario, situated in 2060, when technological unemployment is high. Interviewees expressed optimistic views about the future labour market and dismissed the scenario, preferring the option of job-creation. Students claimed that people would become useless members of society by not working, which argument echoes the Hungarian government's discourse about the need for work-based society. Students also stressed that work gives meaning to life. These narratives show a traditional understanding of work that might inhibit advocates from increasing social support for UBI.

KEYWORDS

automation, Hungary, interviews, universal basic income, welfare attitudes, work values, young citizens

Key Practitioner Message

- Advocates of universal basic income (UBI) might face barriers because of widespread optimism about the future labour market and the traditional understanding of work
- Valorising caring, volunteering, and studying as socially useful activities seems inevitable for increasing public support for UBI
- Students were not aware of many arguments of UBI advocates, highlighting the need to more effectively communicate arguments regarding the advantages and disadvantages of introducing UBI

Abbreviations: UBI, universal basic income.

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of universal basic income (UBI), paying an unconditional benefit to every member of a political community, is quite an old one (Standing, 2017; van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017); however, it has received attention as a potential policy proposal mainly in the past decade (Widerquist, 2019). One of the major drivers of introducing UBI to the sphere of political debate was the idea that UBI may be a good response to the negative consequences of the automation of employment (Standing, 2017; Widerquist, 2019). Discussions surrounding UBI have now become mainstream, with the topic being taken up by major global organisations such as the OECD and ILO (OECD, 2017; Ortiz et al., 2018), as well as labour leaders, some politicians, and even technological entrepreneurs (Dermont & Weisstanner, 2020).

UBI, however, is a quite radical alternative to current welfare systems, as it would replace most other benefits and be unconditionally available to all citizens. It is a question to what extent citizens would accept such a radical change, even in a future society. While previous studies have investigated attitudes towards UBI (e.g., Dermont & Weisstanner, 2020; Martinelli, 2019; Roosma & van Oorschot, 2020; Rossetti et al., 2020; Zimmermann et al., 2020), these mainly focused on the present context. Only a few quantitative studies have examined preferences in relation to UBI in a future scenario of significant technological unemployment (Nam, 2019; Pulkka, 2019). What is more, hardly any research has investigated attitudes towards UBI with qualitative methods (Rossetti et al., 2020; Zimmermann et al., 2020), and none of it has focused on the future context. In this study, we explore attitudes towards UBI in a hypothetical future labour market based on interviews.

Investigating attitudes towards UBI in the context of a highly automated labour market is relevant, as in this case arguments for supporting or opposing UBI might be different from those regarding the contemporary context. In the future, a high level of technological unemployment may create a radically different situation compared to the present, as job seekers will face strong structural barriers to finding paid work due to the widespread utilisation of AI and robots. Exploring views regarding UBI under such circumstances could provide useful insights for policymakers who seek to design socially legitimate policies in response to the negative effects of technological-driven job replacement.

We presented a scenario from 2060 to Hungarian university students undertaking non-technical majors according to which the level of unemployment was said to be high due to robotization and automation and asked them to say whether they would support or oppose the introduction of UBI in such circumstances, and to

explain why. The research questions that guided our study were the following: *What are the arguments of respondents for and against UBI in a future context of technology-related unemployment? What are the similarities and differences between respondents' arguments and experts' views?*

Young people's attitudes are especially relevant in the context of the future, as they will live in the 'future-of-work' (Hill et al., 2019), while the highly educated segment of this population with master's degrees will probably be in a better position than many other segments of society (Celentano, 2019). It is thus interesting to see how members of a group that are more likely to be in a better labour position in the future than most, and therefore will not be personally interested, regard UBI as a solution for technological unemployment. Such an investigation could contribute to understanding whether solidarity towards groups who are left without jobs due to technological development could give rise to enough social legitimacy to sustain UBI in the future.

Finally, our paper broadens the literature by qualitatively investigating these attitudes in a Central-Eastern-European country, as previous studies regarding attitudes towards UBI have mainly relied on comparisons of international survey results or case studies of Western European countries (except for the study of Zimmermann et al., 2020). Hungary serves as an interesting case study as the Hungarian welfare system has been oriented towards a workfare regime since 2010. Thus, it is interesting to investigate students' attitudes towards the introduction of a future UBI that would serve as a policy response to technological unemployment in a country where the current government is putting emphasis on work in return for welfare benefits.

The paper is structured as follows. First, from a review of the literature we summarise the main arguments for the introduction of basic income in the context of automation. Second, we focus on introducing the Hungarian context. We then turn to findings related to attitudes towards UBI. Afterwards, we present the methodology of our research and analyse the results of the interviews. Finally, we conclude the main findings of our research and formulate research and policy implications.

THE FUTURE LABOUR MARKET AND ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST UBI IN THE CONTEXT OF AUTOMATION

A prominent view among experts is that significant technological development will occur in the future which will have transformative effects on the labour market (Boyd & Holton, 2018). There is disagreement, however, whether

the overall long-term effect will be positive or negative, and how it will impact the quantity and quality of jobs. Some economists and experts argue that many jobs might be automated (Frey & Osborne, 2017) and that long-term mass unemployment and poverty are to be expected (Ford, 2015; Harari, 2018). Others predict that job creation will make up for job destruction, or even exceed it, and that people will be able to have jobs that are more creative or less dangerous (Bessen, 2016; Miller & Atkinson, 2013; Peters, 2017). Even in the case of the latter scenario, however, a degree of unemployment that is higher than nowadays is thought to be probable in the short or medium term, although this is not expected to remain on a high level in the long run (Pulkka, 2017).

It is also possible that there will not be mass unemployment for many segments of the population, but joblessness and poverty could still become concentrated among certain groups—for example, among those doing routinized work (Dermont & Weisstanner, 2020). Many authors have also argued that labour markets in the future are expected to be more precarious and associated with jobless periods in the life course. Workers might also have to re-train and re-educate themselves which can result in periods without paid work (Pulkka, 2017).

UBI has emerged as a potential solution to these labour market changes as it could secure the livelihood of those involved in re-training programs, who work in precarious or atypical conditions, or are excluded from the labour market due to automation (Pulkka, 2017; Reed & Lansley, 2016).

In the following, we look at arguments for and against UBI that could be of relevance in the future context of greater automation. We also review some general claims that have not been formulated about the future and apply them to a future situation of high technological unemployment.

Economic security

UBI is often advocated as a potential source of economic security in the case of a high level of unemployment due to automation and labour market insecurity caused by technological change (Gébert & Tózsér, 2018). It is argued that benefits which are tied to work or the level of income would not be flexible enough under such circumstances (Pulkka, 2017). UBI could also contribute to income security when individuals re-train or deepen their education (Pulkka, 2017). Regarding predictions of mass unemployment because of automation, it has been proposed that if no UBI were in place, then consumption could collapse, leading to economic recession. Thus, Ford (2015) claims that for economic growth to occur

UBI is needed in such a situation. Other contributions have proposed a range of unconventional policy alternatives to UBI for addressing the future scenario of mass technological unemployment—for example, work-sharing or taxes on robots (Pulkka, 2017). However, some of these other solutions could still operate alongside UBI (Ford, 2015).

Some opponents of UBI reject predictions of higher technological unemployment in the future (Csillag & Mihályi, 2014; Scharle & Váradi, 2013). Martinelli (2019) argues that if there are problems on the labour market in the future, but they will not be as severe as dystopian views of the future-of-work debate suggest, it is less obvious that UBI would be a good choice. In contrast, other authors support the use of UBI, even in the context of a work-based society with only moderately high permanent technological unemployment—for example, because of the spread of precarious forms of atypical work (Reed & Lansley, 2016).

It is debated whether the poor would fare better with UBI. Based on some calculations the present situation, the introduction of UBI financed by the budget allocated to pre-existing benefits would target the poor less effectively in some countries than benefits currently do (OECD, 2017). In contrast, in the case of a more generous UBI which could provide a decent standard of living for all, additional taxes would be needed. Objections to such a solution include the fact that an increase in personal income tax would not be welcomed by many, and the political barriers to this approach (Martinelli, 2019). However, in a situation of greater productivity and profits brought about by advanced automation, a more generous UBI would be easier to manage. Moderate taxes on robots have been proposed as one of the sources of financing for a higher UBI in the context of advanced robotization (Pulkka, 2017).

Freedom, the good life and motivation to work

Those who are for UBI even in the current context often see UBI as a benefit that would increase freedom by encouraging citizens to engage in non-market activities such as caring, volunteering, and studying, as well as starting their own businesses (van Parijs, 1995; van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017; Vida, 2013). Proponents argue that people could also devote more time to leisure, such as pursuing interests in the arts and culture. Similarly, some authors who envision a post-work society because of automation argue that, in this context, these are the kinds of valuable activities which people could do if they had economic security, which could be achieved with the help of basic income (Srnicsek & Williams, 2015).

However, in relation to the current context, others have argued that it is problematic that UBI could encourage people not to work at all (Artner, 2019). One assertion is that people would become lazy due to the lack of work, and negative social and psychological phenomena would increase, similar to those that have been observed among the unemployed. It has also been claimed that some work is part of ‘the good life’, although others argue that UBI could give people a chance to realise their own conceptions of a good life and to decide whether work is part of it (van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017). It has also been argued that UBI would not discourage people from finding paid work, or that only an insignificant number of people would not work, and that those individuals would not be the most motivated workers anyway (Standing, 2017; van Parijs, 2004; van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017).

It is important to consider that in a future scenario in which fewer jobs are available because of automation the fact that some people might not work because of UBI could even reduce social tension. Thus, some of the arguments that might be formulated against UBI in the current context (e.g., that it might reduce the inclination to work) would not be valid in a situation of high technological unemployment. Indeed, some argue that as the number of jobs would be limited in such a situation, it should be the role of the state to make it possible for people to be able to choose not to work (Gébert & Tózsér, 2018).

Fairness

Profound ethical objections have been also voiced against UBI. A key criticism is the claim that it is not just or fair to give such a stipend to everybody: even to those who do not work or those who do not need it (Bendel, 2019; Scharle & Váradi, 2013). Counterarguments by those in favour of UBI draw attention to the fact that the profits from income-generating activity are presently not necessarily fairly distributed—for example, much of the ‘voluntary work’ or household tasks done by women are not paid for. For van Parijs and Vanderborght (2017), this is an even greater injustice. They also argue that even nowadays the wealthy can live comfortably, even if they do not work, whereas poor people do not have this option. Thus, the current setup favours the idleness of rich people and sanctions the poor. Straubhaar (2017) argues that UBI could be fair if it were coupled with progressive taxes.

Even in a future situation of high technological unemployment there would be people who did not need UBI but still would get it, as well as people who would not work but would still receive it. However, in a strongly automated environment with high technological unemployment, people might see the deservingness of the unemployed

differently. It has been argued that ‘what is unfair in automation is that it threatens people’s livelihoods and jeopardises their economic security’ (Celentano, 2019, p. 33).

Positive ethical arguments for UBI in relation to technological change emphasise that UBI could more equally redistribute common wealth produced by ‘implicit digital work’—the work of consumers in a digitalized society who are continually asked to test and provide feedback on the products of artificial intelligence (AI) companies (Allegrì & Foschi, 2021). Fairness is also emphasised in the argument that taxpayers have contributed to technological development over generations, thus a more equal sharing of the benefits of technological progress is justified—an argument made by Ford (2015) as part of the future-of-work debate.

To conclude, the effects of introducing UBI are debated; relevant arguments have been formulated both in favour of UBI and against it. However, some of the negative claims described earlier are less relevant in the case of a future scenario when a smaller proportion of the population is working at a given time, many have to re-educate themselves, and when greater profits are being earned with the help of technology (Pulkka, 2017).

In the following, we review the Hungarian context, to explore how the policy environment, expert debates and media representation of UBI could influence support for UBI in the context of automation.

THE HUNGARIAN CONTEXT

The topic of UBI has been salient in the Hungarian policy literature to some extent since the beginning of 2010s. For instance, some of the articles of leading scholars in this field (e.g., van Parijs) were translated and published in a Hungarian policy journal in 2010 (Misétics, 2010).

Nevertheless, UBI appeared as a potential policy option in the public discourse and received some media attention in 2013–2014 (e.g., Gébert & Tózsér, 2013; Mandiner, 2014; Scharle & Váradi, 2013). In 2014, a Hungarian academic team (LÉT, 2014) developed a programme that proposed the introduction of a UBI scheme that would pay varying amounts to children, adults, and pregnant women. Their most important argument for its introduction was that such a scheme would reduce the level of income poverty and the share of people living below the subsistence level to a significant extent. Some of their other supporting arguments were associated with perceived global trends expected to continue in the future—such as the increase in unemployment due to technological development, whilst other claims were specific to Hungary: the scholars emphasised that salaries in Hungary are low compared to the EU average and complained of rising inequality in the country.

Others, however, criticised the proposal or idea of UBI, mainly because of its questionable economic feasibility, and due to the claim that it would demotivate people from finding paid work. In relation to the current situation, these experts believed that UBI would do more harm than good when taking into account the level of development of the country, as well as its economic and social structure (Scharle & Váradi, 2013). They argued that it should not be tried in Hungary because of bad earlier experiences with socialism; that inequality in Hungary is not extreme; and that a UBI would not be enough help to members of the Roma population stuck in small villages (Csillag & Mihályi, 2014).

Regarding the future, the same experts questioned whether automation would create a high level of unemployment, and, in line with this, they stated that for economic growth it is necessary to increase the labour supply, which might be moderated by the introduction of UBI (Csillag & Mihályi, 2014; Scharle & Váradi, 2013). However, other studies showed that the proportion of the least innovative Taylolean jobs at higher risk of automation had increased in Hungary compared to other countries (Illéssy & Makó, 2020).

The results of the Finnish experiment were also presented in Hungarian media portals. While these articles highlighted some positive results of the experiment, the emphasis was on the fact that basic income had not motivated people to find paid work (e.g., Horváth, 2019; Kovács-Angel, 2020).

Furthermore, UBI received political attention as well. The idea of a basic income was embraced by a Hungarian political party, Dialogue for Hungary, in 2015. They developed further the proposal of the LÉT group and promoted basic income as a solution for social inequalities (Megújuló Magyarországért Alapítvány, 2015, 2020). This party is, however, rather tiny compared to the governing party (Fidesz) and has far less political power and media access, as the Hungarian media has gradually become more strongly linked to government-friendly assets or actors since the election of the second Orbán government in 2010 (Polyák, 2019).

Meanwhile, the opinion of the prime minister, Viktor Orbán, is also present in public discourse. He has explicitly rejected the idea of UBI, which he compares to socialism, and has stated that it would ruin Hungary's work-based society. He also emphasised the claim that people would become lazy and would not work (Coelho, 2017; Infostart, 2020). These ideas are in line with the government's discourse and policy since 2010, as it promotes a work-based society, according to which social protection is only available in return for work (Szikra, 2018). The foundation of such a workfare regime was supported by the recurring myth in domestic welfare and

public debate of benefit scroungers, often perceived to be Roma, since the early 2000s (Vidra, 2018).

While the policy context does not seem to represent good ground for supporting a UBI scheme, earlier survey research found quite strong support for UBI among the Hungarian public. Roosma and van Oorschot (2020) found that the introduction of UBI is quite well supported in Europe, and this support was third strongest in Hungary (69%), after Latvia (80%) and Russia (73%). Hungary, therefore, is an interesting context for an investigation of support for UBI, as earlier quantitative findings and social policy changes paired with the government discourse create a contradictory picture.

In the following, we review other results regarding the support of UBI that might be important to our research.

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR BASIC INCOME

While Roosma and van Oorschot (2020) in their survey research found strong support for UBI in European countries in the present context, they argue that people do not necessarily support UBI because of its universal and unconditional character, but rather because it would provide a guaranteed minimum income to the poor. Furthermore, results of other survey-based studies (Chrisp et al., 2020; Stadelmann-Steffen & Dermont, 2020) show that people rather support the abstract idea of basic income than actual policy proposals within which additional taxes or cuts to existing benefits are specified. Moreover, Kozák (2021) found that people support UBI less in those countries where engagement with work is stronger.

These findings are supported by the qualitative research of Rossetti et al. (2020). Dutch interviewees justified their support for UBI by emphasising that it would provide basic social protection for everyone and would improve the circumstances of low-income citizens and social assistance recipients. However, respondents criticised the idea that the rich would also receive UBI and it was also argued that people should do something in return for the benefit. Moreover, interviewees stated that they would refuse to pay additional taxes to support such an initiative and questioned its overall economic feasibility. Zimmermann et al. (2020), however, raised attention to institutional differences in people's arguments. While German interviewees criticised UBI's unconditionality and universality by stressing the importance of achievements and investments, Slovenians supported these features of UBI by arguing that the state should cover everyone's basic needs.

It is a question how attitudes to UBI would change if, instead of the present, we investigated a future scenario

in which technologically driven job replacement were more evident and extreme. In a US survey from 2017, citizens were asked whether they would be in favour of the introduction of UBI in a scenario in which robots and computers were capable of doing many human jobs. Results showed that people who believed that work would be extensively automated in the future were more likely to support UBI (Nam, 2019). Pulkka (2019) also found that lower-level clerical workers who were liable to think that technological unemployment would increase in the following 10 years supported basic income most strongly from all occupational groups in a Finnish survey.

Such investigations would be especially relevant in the case of young people, as the future labour market is likely to involve more automation than now. Young people have been found to be more supportive of the introduction of UBI than older people in quantitative research—both in relation to the present time (Dermont & Weisstanner, 2020; Roosma & van Oorschot, 2020) and in the future in a situation of greater technological development (Pulkka, 2019). It is still unclear, however, if their more supportive attitudes show an age or a cohort effect, as it is possible that the new generation has differing values compared to older generations that is driving their support for UBI (Roosma & van Oorschot, 2020). Furthermore, we do not know whether they would accept UBI as a solution to technological-driven job replacement or as a benefit that would supplement work-related income.

DATA AND METHODS

In spring 2020, 30 interviews were conducted with MA students from diverse disciplines that were not related to technology or ‘hard’ science, including law, economics, psychology, languages, teacher training, communication, ethnography, design, and so forth, who were studying at different universities in Budapest, the capital city of Hungary. The reason that members of the sample were studying non-technical majors was because the current study was part of a bigger research project which focused on expectations of this segment of students in relation to the future-of-work and automation.

Research subjects were chosen with the help of young interns familiar with the target population. Our aim was to include both male and female students in the sample, and as in the target population the share of women is greater, to have more women in the sample than men. The final sample contained 12 male and 18 female students, whose ages ranged from 22 to 27.

Interview questions related to UBI and robotization were part of a bigger semi-structured interview on the

topic of the future of the labour market and automation. The UBI question block took about 15–20 min to answer. We also scanned the rest of the interviews for relevant material for the analysis. We presented the following scenario to respondents at the beginning of the UBI block:

‘Please imagine that we are in 2060. The unemployment level is high, robots and AI are carrying out many jobs. There is a debate in parliament about whether to introduce a basic income scheme for everyone. The basic income scheme would include all of the following: The government pays a monthly income to everyone to cover essential living costs. It replaces many other social benefits. The purpose is to guarantee everyone a minimum standard of living. Everyone receives the same amount regardless of whether or not they are working. People also keep the money they earn from work or other sources. This scheme is paid for by taxes. The government would ask the public for their support for this, and they would also ask you. What would you reply? What would your arguments be?’

We used the ESS definition of UBI (European Social Survey, 2016). Further clarifying questions were asked after presenting this scenario to elicit detailed information about respondents’ arguments.

Interviews were transcribed and analysed with the help of the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. The transcripts were investigated with qualitative thematic analysis, through which we aimed to identify recurrent patterns of responses and meanings (themes). Our process followed the suggestions of Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) first, we read the transcribed interviews several times while writing down ideas; (2) we then created initial codes in a systematic way across the dataset; (3) we reread the codes and combined some of them into potential themes whilst discarding others as irrelevant to our research; (4) we looked over the themes, and then; (5) defined and named them. We concluded with (6) writing the analysis.

RESULTS

Narratives about UBI for the future scenario

‘People Need Work, not UBI!’

Despite the scenario that was presented, according to which there was a high level of technological unemployment, students emphasised the need to create new opportunities for work. Therefore, they did not seem to accept the condition that people might not be able to work because of automation and demonstrated resistance towards the scenario. In general, therefore, UBI was not perceived as being a solution to technological

unemployment in the eyes of the interviewees, who also emphasised that technological development should not threaten people's opportunities to work. It was mentioned that AI and robots should be developed only to that extent that space is left for human employees.

The importance of work, therefore, played a crucial role in the rejection of UBI, and the interviewees emphasised two main arguments. On the one hand, it was common for them to express their concern that UBI would make people lazy, as people would not be motivated to find work while receiving UBI. Connected to this idea, students also stressed that without work, people would not be useful members of society. On the other hand, the interviewees also emphasised that work has significant value, and that people's lives would be meaningless without work. They mentioned that people are used to going to work every day, which gives them a routine or schedule for everyday life; moreover, it was also stated in the narratives that work gives people a sense of dignity.

'Absolutely healthy, qualified people would also not take up paid work because they receive UBI— while they would otherwise become useful members of society, but due to UBI they would not' (Interviewee #15).

'People need work. If people have nothing to do, then life is meaningless' (Interviewee #20).

While the interviewees still felt negatively about UBI and did not sympathise with its introduction, they also struggled with the choice between UBI and a lack of work-related opportunities; and while they found UBI to be a better solution than unemployment and poverty, they still insisted on the need to create new opportunities for work. Some of the interviewees therefore would accept the introduction of UBI only due to the necessity described in the presented scenario:

'It (UBI) would be surely better than receiving nothing, because that (having no work) would not be a solution— (the situation) that people do not have the opportunity to work because of artificial intelligence and robots—but I am still staying that we should work on creating workplaces and opportunities instead of allocating free money' (Interviewee #1).

Some students imagined a scenario (which they, however, found unlikely to happen) in which everything is done by robots and AI, nobody needs to work, and people just enjoy the profits. Under these circumstances, some of them believed that UBI would be beneficial as public funds need to be distributed somehow. UBI was considered an appropriate tool in this regard.

In all other circumstances, UBI was primarily viewed negatively. This attitude was probably supported by the interviewees' optimistic expectations regarding the future labour market. Most of them stressed that while there

will be technological unemployment, this will only be moderate, or last for a short period. Their narratives included the belief that, in the near future, technological unemployment will most likely involve the jobs of the lower educated and those doing routinized tasks. Moreover, they believed that their occupations were more or less secure for the following 20–30 years. Those who believed that the development of AI and robotics would affect their occupation also highlighted that for higher-level jobs (e.g., managerial ones) employees would still need to hire humans due to their complex nature. Furthermore, it was also a widely shared belief among the respondents that new types of work would be created, as has always happened during previous periods of technological development, and that governments would not leave people without work. It was also mentioned that there might be a shortage of labour in the case of numerous high-skilled technology-related jobs.

All in all, the general narrative of the interviewees was quite positive and included the image of a technologically developed future with new opportunities, which vision might have prevented them from empathising with the citizens of a future labour market in which technological development has caused a high level of unemployment. As the interviewees were university students, their perceived privileged position could also have contributed to the lack of support for UBI. However, this attitude also shows a low level of solidarity with those who (in the view of respondents) will be affected by the negative consequences of automation.

'UBI, but only for short time, or for the deserving, or using a small amount of money'.

While the original concept of UBI in general was not welcomed by interviewees, the opinions of the interviewees were also quite volatile during the interviews. Their first thought was often to support the introduction of UBI in a future society; however, after they started to talk and think about the concept, they usually changed their views and rejected the idea. Nevertheless, some of those who rejected UBI also emphasised the advantages of UBI at some points in the interview. A small proportion of them would even support UBI in its original form or would support UBI with modifications. However, in many of these cases, the proposed modifications violate the universal or unconditional character of UBI.

For instance, interviewees mentioned that they would give UBI to citizens only for a short period, but not as a lifetime benefit as this would undermine the work ethic. Regarding technological-related job replacement, some of them found it to be a good idea to provide UBI for those who are involved in re-training programs for new jobs that have evolved due to technological development:

'One thing that I thought is that for a transitional period, whilst someone is learning a new profession that they could use in the new environment (i.e., a transformed labour market), that for that time it (UBI) could surely be good' (Interviewee #13).

Some interviewees also emphasised that they would support giving UBI to those in more vulnerable positions (e.g., the disabled or poor), thus they rejected the universal character of UBI. Nevertheless, in this case interviewees also highlighted that it should not be a life-long benefit which would demotivate people from finding work. Finally, some respondents found relief in supporting UBI with the condition that it would represent an amount only enough to cover a minimum standard of living, so people who have greater needs would still be motivated to work.

'UBI is OK, but not in Hungary'.

The context of the interviews also seems to have influenced the narratives of the interviewees. The final rejection of UBI, even in a future society, was frequently connected to the Hungarian reality. On the one hand, it was linked to the economic situation of the country, as students often could not imagine that in the near future (within the next 20–30 years) technological unemployment would be significant, or that an economic arrangement that involves UBI could be successfully introduced. On the other hand, negative perspectives about the work ethic of Hungarians were also a barrier to support. For instance, some of the students emphasised that while UBI could be a good solution for a high level of technological unemployment in other societies (e.g., in Japan or Germany), they outlined their belief that Hungarians tend to exploit the welfare system and people in Hungary do not feel that they need to do anything in order to be useful members of society (in contrast to the mentioned societies):

'Well, if it were introduced in Hungary, then everyone would surely sit back, even those who were able to work, and they would wait for assistance—as is usual nowadays' (Interviewee #19).

In some cases, this idea was complemented with reference to the Roma minority and their low level of representation in the work force. Moreover, it was also highlighted that only those people are useful members of society who work. These thoughts are in line with the current Hungarian government's narrative, which promotes a 'work-based society'.

Furthermore, similarly to in Orbán's speeches (Coelho, 2017; Infostart, 2020), socialism was mentioned by the students as a reference point. UBI was seen as being part of or similar to the functioning of a socialist society. A few interviewees highlighted that while socialism had not worked, UBI would not work as well.

Layman's arguments for and against UBI compared to experts' views

We were also interested in how the interviewees' reasoning compares to that presented by UBI experts in the literature.

As we have seen, within the future-of-work literature there is a debate about the likely extent of future technological unemployment (Boyd & Holton, 2018). Within Hungary, pro-UBI experts have often predicted future mass unemployment due to technological change (Gébert & Tózsér, 2018) whilst anti-UBI experts generally dismiss this scenario (Csillag & Mihályi, 2014; Scharle & Váradi, 2013). Students mainly expressed the optimistic view that there would be a low level of unemployment, in line with the anti-UBI experts.

Another important difference in students' and pro-UBI experts' views regards the understanding of work. While students emphasised that life would be meaningless without (paid) work, as noted earlier, one of the main arguments of pro-UBI experts is that, under a system that includes UBI, less traditional forms of work would also be better appreciated and supported (such as caring work and volunteering) (van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017; Vida, 2013). Students stressed the importance of citizens' contributions to society, but the latter were imagined mainly in the form of paid work.

While basic income is often described by advocates as a benefit that facilitates freedom (van Parijs, 1995) as it gives people the chance to do the work and activities that they like, some of the interviewees connected the idea of basic income with dictatorship and a loss of personal freedom. In this regard, the social context and the socialist past of Hungary also seemed to be relevant, and some of the students explicitly referred to the history of the country.

'There was already such (a UBI system) in history: it was called socialism, and it did not really work. (...) I think that it is an idealistic concept that is impossible to realize, and which always leads to the extreme, and it will finally end in a totalitarian dictatorship or something like that' (Interviewee #2).

Some experts in Hungary who are against UBI have also referred to the socialist past when rejecting UBI, although not in relation to the idea of a loss of freedom (Csillag & Mihályi, 2014).

Moreover, students, similar to experts, were quite polarised regarding the fairness of the basic income scheme (Bendel, 2019; Gébert & Tózsér, 2018; Scharle & Váradi, 2013). UBI was also often rejected from the perspective of an evaluation of its impact on social equity. Students stressed that such a benefit would generate an even higher level of inequality, but arguments were diverse regarding the nature of such inequality.

Some respondents saw UBI as unequal because those in a good economic position (especially rich people) would receive the benefit as well, while another group of students said the system was unfair because the non-working population would also receive it. However, the arguments of pro-UBI experts (van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017) regarding the valorisation of caring and volunteering and its effect on equality were not reflected in the interviews.

Nevertheless, some students emphasised that UBI would produce a higher level of equality, as everyone receives the same amount of money, which would cover the basic needs of each citizen. Such respondents liked the idea that workers would also receive it as a form of extra income, and that the benefit would prevent other, jobless people from slipping into poverty.

'And I like the idea that if someone has a job, they can still keep their basic income as extra money, while it would be guaranteed that no one would slip into poverty or have bad living conditions because robots have taken away work from humans' (Interviewee #27).

Concerns regarding the economic feasibility of UBI were also mentioned by the respondents. It was typical for interviewees to question whether workers would be able to sustain the system if there were people who did not work, yet received UBI. They also questioned UBI's feasibility because of the current economic situation of Hungary. These arguments have been raised by Hungarian experts who criticise UBI as well (Csillag & Mihályi, 2014).

Alternative ideas about taxation raised by advocates of UBI (Pulkka, 2017) were not mentioned by the respondents (e.g., taxes on robots), suggesting that students have traditional views in this regard. They also could not imagine that profit might be produced in alternative ways in the future (by robots and AI), and only those mentioned such alternatives who imagined a scenario in which people do not need to work at all. Many other arguments of UBI advocates were not mentioned in the interviews (not even as items that the interviewees do not agree with).

CONCLUSION

In this study, based on 30 interviews with Hungarian MA students completing non-technical majors, we investigated the narratives of young citizens regarding the introduction of a UBI scheme in the future labour market, in which technological unemployment is high. While previous studies have focused on public attitudes towards UBI in the contemporary context or investigated attitudes regarding the future labour market based on survey results, the novelty of our research is that we specifically explored attitudes qualitatively, using a future context,

and looked at young citizens' arguments for supporting or rejecting UBI in such a situation.

Our analysis showed that students mainly reject the idea of UBI in a future scenario of high technological unemployment and, despite the structural barrier presented in the scenario (i.e., robots have taken over many jobs), they expressed a preference for creating new work opportunities instead of providing UBI to citizens. They insisted that people need to work, and that technological development should not endanger people's opportunities to work. Such results are in line with findings from earlier research projects which focused on the current context and highlighted the importance of work for those who reject UBI (Kozák, 2021; Rossetti et al., 2020). However, compared to the results of Rossetti et al. (2020), the significance of work was emphasised in even more respects: interviewees talked about the importance of employment not only based on a societal perspective (i.e., that UBI would make people lazy, increase unemployment, and thus encourage citizens to be unproductive), but also from the individual perspective (i.e., work gives meaning to life).

That students insisted that people need to work also shows that they could not and would not like to imagine a situation in the future in which humans could not find work because AI and robots have taken over a large segment of work. It seems they could not detach themselves from the current context. Moreover, they also believed that their own jobs would be safe and expressed their view that it was mainly the less well-educated and those who have routinized jobs whose livelihoods are threatened by automation. These beliefs most probably inhibited students from identifying themselves with future workers excluded from the labour market due to automation.

Students' narratives also included the scenario that while some jobs will be automated, new kinds of work and opportunities will be created. Connected to this idea, some of the elements of UBI were supported by a portion of the interviewees. The latter group of students would support the provision of a short-term basic income during a period of re-training. In this regard, the opinions of students are similar to those of experts who consider UBI to be a good solution for labour market insecurity (also during a time of re-training) (Pulkka, 2017). However, students could only imagine basic income in the form of a temporary benefit, not as an unconditional and universal benefit which everyone would get irrespective of their employment status. Moreover, while pro-UBI experts support UBI as it would recognise unpaid work, such as caring and volunteering (van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017), students' narratives involved a more traditional image of work as paid activity.

The narratives of our interviewees therefore do not correspond to previous results that have found strong

support for UBI among young people (Roosma & van Oorschot, 2020). However, our qualitative method showed that students had quite volatile opinions (supporting the idea of UBI at first, but then opposing it after facing more concrete questions about it), highlighting that quantitative surveys might not sufficiently capture the multidimensionality of young people's attitudes. Furthermore, we investigated university students' attitudes in the context of a highly automated labour market. Their optimistic views about their perceived futures and consequent lack of interest in introducing UBI under such circumstances might also explain why they did not support UBI.

Moreover, they did not show solidarity with the unemployed, which may be because they rejected the view of a jobless society, emphasising that technological development should not reach such a level that people cannot find work. Therefore, they did not accept UBI as an alternative to paid work, as work was mentioned as an important activity and value in their narratives. Such strong emphasis on paid work also contradicts the assumption that young people's support for UBI is fuelled by the differing values of the new generation (Roosma & van Oorschot, 2020), as our interviewees demonstrated quite traditional values, at least regarding work.

The negative attitudes of our respondents could also be explained by the Hungarian context, and in this regard our analysis strengthens previous results that show that the context influences the narratives regarding support for UBI (Rossetti et al., 2020; Zimmermann et al., 2020), and that the importance of work may vary in different contexts (Weiss & Hörisch, 2022). Students often expressed views that are in line with the Hungarian government's agenda of a work-based society. They emphasised their belief that people must work to receive benefits, and that, without work, people would become useless members of society. Similar to the Hungarian prime minister's views, UBI was compared to socialism by some of the interviewees, who argued that while socialism has not worked in the past, UBI would likewise not work in the future, as it would undermine the work ethic.

While we investigated the attitudes in a future scenario compared to previous studies focusing on the present, our results suggest that the attitudes of these Hungarian respondents are more in line with the attitudes of the Dutch (Rossetti et al., 2020) than the Slovenian or German respondents (Zimmermann et al., 2020). This, we suggest, could be explained by the similar workfare regime of the Netherlands and Hungary. Interestingly, our results are least similar to those of the Slovenians, despite the socialist past of both countries.

Hungarian respondents, therefore, similarly to Dutch respondents, referred to deservingness-related perceptions

of control (individual responsibility), reciprocity, and need (van Oorschot, 2000) by emphasising that only those people are deserving of state benefits who are not lazy and engage in paid work, and who are not responsible for their needy situation. Our respondents were only able to disregard their stress on personal responsibility when (at later stages of the interview) some of them finally accepted the hypothetical scenario—in this case they emphasised that it would not be people's fault that they could not work due to the high level of automation. In addition, while German and Slovenian respondents imagined UBI as a potential future policy option that would simplify social security systems, Hungarian respondents, similar to Dutch ones, rather expressed their concern regarding the feasibility of introducing UBI. Finally, it is interesting that while German respondents often argued that UBI would facilitate individual freedom, in Hungary UBI was rather paired with the experience of socialism and with a loss of freedom.

The negative reactions towards UBI in our research might partially be explained by the specific framing of UBI (our future scenario). Previous studies have suggested that the public supports UBI rather in the form of a benefit that would provide a minimum income to the poor than as a universal benefit (Roosma & van Oorschot, 2020). In our scenario, the interviewees might have perceived UBI as more of an unemployment benefit than a universal one or as a benefit that would help the poor because it was framed as a solution to technological unemployment. While previous quantitative findings (Gugushvili & van Oorschot, 2021) have shown that Hungarians are quite sceptical about the deservingness of the unemployed (similarly to the citizens of other Eastern European countries), the negative reactions towards UBI perceived as a benefit for the unemployed are more in line with those described in earlier literature. Besides the differences in sample composition and the non-representative nature of the sample, this might also explain why our interviewees demonstrated far less positive attitudes compared to interviewees from another post-socialist country, Slovenia (Zimmermann et al., 2020). Overall, the results highlight that framing could be of significant importance in terms of building social legitimacy for the introduction of UBI.

All in all, interviewees' narratives did not mirror the high level of support of UBI found in the ESS. While our results cannot be compared to those of the ESS, as our sample was taken from a specific, non-representative segment of the population, and we investigated a future situation instead of a contemporary one, the narratives of students underline the complexity of attitudes towards UBI that might not be sufficiently captured using quantitative studies—especially if only one survey question is used to examine attitudes towards UBI.

Care should also be taken when investigating attitudes towards UBI using a future scenario of significant automation, as it can be problematic to differentiate between the rejection of UBI and the rejection of a scenario of a high level of technological job replacement.

Finally, our results suggest that advocates of UBI might face barriers because of general optimism about the future labour market, as well as due to a traditional understanding of work that includes only paid work and excludes caring, volunteering, and studying. Valourising caring, volunteering, and studying as socially useful activities, therefore, seems to be inevitable for increasing public support for UBI. The valorisation of these activities could help to reduce the social gap between those who would contribute and the beneficiaries of such a scheme, thereby helping to increase solidarity with jobless groups. Furthermore, our results suggest that respondents might not be aware of many of the arguments that UBI advocates have formulated. This highlights the relevance of familiarising citizens with these arguments so they can form opinions based on more extensive knowledge.

The limitations of the research include its non-representative nature. However, the fact that similar answers recurrently arose in the interviews suggests that our findings might be of relevance outside of the concrete situations in which they originated.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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