

Gabriella Pusztai / Klára Kovács (eds.)

Well-Being of Academic Staff in Rapidly Changing Higher Education

**A Focus on Central
and Eastern Europe**

Changes in higher education in recent decades – such as expansion, the Bologna reform, internationalization, competition for students, managerialism, and the emergence of a service-oriented approach – have fundamentally transformed the work of academics. The aim of our research, which forms the basis of this volume and is particularly relevant to the region, was to examine the well-being, working conditions, and performance of academics in five Central and Eastern European countries: Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, and Serbia. This volume consists of two main chapters that present empirical findings based on qualitative and quantitative survey data, as well as national and international statistical databases. The first chapter analyses key higher education indicators from the five countries studied and describes the educational policy environment shaping academic work. The second chapter explores the background factors and effectiveness of academics' work.

Gabriella Pusztai is a professor in educational sociology and director of the Center for Higher Education Research and Development at the University of Debrecen.

Klára Kovács is an associate professor at the University of Debrecen and CHERD researcher, focusing on sports, well-being, and academic performance.

ISBN 978-3-631-93968-0



www.peterlang.com

Well-Being of Academic Staff in Rapidly Changing Higher Education

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH AND POLICY

VOL. 11

Series Editor

Marek Kwiek, Center for Public Policy Studies and UNESCO Chair
in Institutional Research and Higher Education Policy,
University of Poznan, Poland

Editorial Board Members

Daniel C. Levy, Department of Educational Administration and
Policy Studies, State University of New York, Albany, USA

Peter Maassen, Department of Educational Research,
University of Oslo, Norway

Paul Temple, Centre for Higher Education Studies (CHES),
Institute of Education, University of London, London, United Kingdom

Pavel Zgaga, Centre for Educational Policy Studies (CEPS),
Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

The *Higher Education Research and Policy* (HERP) series is intended to present both research-oriented studies of higher education systems in transition, especially for comparative international perspectives. Higher education systems worldwide are currently under multi-layered pressures to transform their funding and governance structures in rapidly changing environments. The series intends to explore the impact of such wider social and economic processes as globalization, internationalization and Europeanization on higher education institutions, and is focused on such issues as the changing relationships between the university and the state, the changing academic profession, changes in public funding and university governance, the emergent public/private dynamics in higher education, the consequences of educational expansion, education as public/private goods, and the impact of changing demographics on national systems. Its audience includes higher education researchers and higher education policy analysts, university managers and administrators, as well as national policymakers and the staff of international organizations involved in higher education policymaking.

Gabriella Pusztai / Klára Kovács (eds.)

Well-Being of Academic Staff in Rapidly Changing Higher Education

A Focus on Central and Eastern Europe



PETER LANG

Berlin · Bruxelles · Chennai · Lausanne · New York · Oxford

Bibliographic Information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available online at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Pusztai, Gabriella editor | Kovács, Klára editor

Title: Well-being of academic staff in rapidly changing higher education :

a focus on Central and Eastern Europe / Editors: Gabriella Pusztai & Klára Kovács.

Description: New York : Peter Lang, 2026. | Series: Higher education research and policy,

2193-7613 | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025019772 (print) | LCCN 2025019773 (ebook) |

ISBN 9783631939680 hardback | ISBN 9783631939710 pdf | ISBN 9783631940273 epub

Subjects: LCSH: College teachers--Job satisfaction--Europe, Central |

College teachers--Job satisfaction--Europe, Eastern | Well-being--Europe, Central |

Well-being--Europe, Eastern | Educational change--Europe, Central | Educational

change--Europe, Eastern | Higher education and state--Europe, Central | Higher education

and state--Europe, Eastern | Universities and colleges--Europe, Central--Sociological aspects |

Universities and colleges--Europe, Eastern--Sociological aspects

Classification: LCC LB2331.74.E8515 W45 2025 (print) | LCC LB2331.74.E8515 (ebook) |

DDC 378.1/20943--dc23/eng/20250605

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025019772>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025019773>

This publication was financially supported by the University of Debrecen. This research was supported by the project 'Investigating the role of sport and physical activity for a healthy and safe society in the individual and social sustainability of work ability and quality of work and life (multidisciplinary research umbrella program)' and by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Project no. TKP2021-EGA-20 has been implemented with the support provided by the Ministry of Culture and Innovation of Hungary from the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund, financed under the TKP2021-EGA funding scheme.

ISSN 2193-7613

ISBN 978-3-631-93968-0 (Print)

ISBN 978-3-631-93971-0 (ePDF)

ISBN 978-3-631-94027-3 (ePUB)

DOI 10.3726/b23030

© 2026 Peter Lang Group AG, Lausanne (Switzerland)

Published by Peter Lang GmbH, Berlin (Germany)

info@peterlang.com

All rights reserved.

All parts of this publication are protected by copyright.

Any utilization outside the strict limits of the copyright law, without the permission of the publisher, is forbidden and liable to prosecution. This applies in particular to reproductions, translations, microfilming, and storage and processing in electronic retrieval systems.

This publication has been peer reviewed.

www.peterlang.com

Reviewers

Irén Gábrity Molnár, Tamás Kozma and Silvia Matúšová

English Proofreader

Johnathan Dabney

Table of Contents

List of Figures	9
List of Tables	13
1. Challenges and Well-Being of Academics on the Eastern Border of the European Union. The Background and Rationale for the Book	17
<i>Gabriella Pusztai & Klára Kovács</i>	
PART I	
Higher Education Systems as the Working Environment of Academic Staff in Central and Eastern Europe: Country Studies	
2. Changes in Higher Education and Academic Staff in Hungary	45
<i>István Polónyi</i>	
3. Higher Education Academics in Slovakia	71
<i>Dana Hanesová, Lenka Rovňanová & Patrícia Zólyomiová</i>	
4. Academics in the Romanian Higher Education Context	105
<i>Imre Tódor</i>	
5. Characteristics of the Higher Education System and Academic Staff in Serbia	145
<i>Elvira Kovács & Zoltán Papp</i>	
6. Challenges in Higher Education and for Academics in Ukraine	177
<i>Katalin Pallay</i>	

PART II

Well-Being of Academics in Central and Eastern Europe

7. Performance Assessment: A New Dimension of Institutional Culture	207
<i>Gabriella Pusztai, Zsuzsanna Demeter-Karászi & Katalin Pallay</i>	
8. (Inclusive) Teaching Practice and Well-Being Among Higher Education Academics in Central and Eastern Europe	231
<i>Anett Hrabéczy & Zsófia Kocsis</i>	
9. International Mobility and Its Impediments for Academics	263
<i>Ilona Dóra Dabney-Fekete, Ágnes Réka Dusa & Katalin Pallay</i>	
10. Research Productivity and Workplace Stress Among Academics	287
<i>Klára Kovács, Marianna Moravetz & Gabriella Hideg</i>	
11. Work-Life Conflicts: A Dual Functionality Approach on Career of Academics	305
<i>Emese Beáta Berei, Ágnes Engler & Klára Kovács</i>	
12. The Cultural Involvement Patterns of Academics	327
<i>Edina Márkus, Judit Herczegh & Márta Miklósi</i>	
13. What Have We Learned About the Well-Being and Performance of Academics in EU Border Region Countries?	347
<i>Klára Kovács & Ilona Dabney-Fekete</i>	
Notes on Contributors	361
Index	363

List of Figures

Figure 2.1	The population aged 18–22 and the number of students and academic staff in Hungarian higher education from the regime change until today	50
Figure 2.2	Gross enrollment rate of higher education in Hungary and the EU and OECD average	51
Figure 2.3	Graduates as a percentage of the population 25–34 years of age	51
Figure 2.4	Development of academic staff and student-academic staff ratio in Hungarian higher education, 1990–2022	53
Figure 2.5	Percentage of women among academic staff in Hungary	54
Figure 2.6	Changes in the number of academic posts in higher education 2000–2020	61
Figure 2.7	Average total monthly earnings of university graduates and academic staff by age (HUF/month) in 2016	63
Figure 2.8	Cumulative lifetime earnings based on 2016 data with a discount rate of 2 percent (million HUF)	64
Figure 3.1	Numbers of HEIs and their faculties in Slovakia	75
Figure 3.2	HE students as % of 20–24 years old in the Visegrád Four countries	76
Figure 3.3	Gross enrollment rate of HE students in Slovakia	77
Figure 3.4	The proportion of HE graduates aged 25–34 (%)—international comparison	78
Figure 3.5	HE students-academic staff ratio 2000–2017 (Slovakia, Hungary, Poland)	81

Figure 3.6	Comparison of the % ratio of enrolled HE students (within 18–34-years-old) in 2000 and in 2017 as well as the % change in the number of academics between 2000 and 2017 (Visegrád Four countries)	82
Figure 3.7	Proportion of females among Academics in HE in the EU/OECD and in Slovakia	85
Figure 3.8	Net flow ratio of internationally mobile students (inbound–outbound), both sexes (%)	92
Figure 3.9	Government expenditure on HE as a percentage of GDP (%)—Visegrád Four and Finland	94
Figure 3.10	International comparison of public expenditure on HE (% of government expenditure on education) 2004–2021	95
Figure 3.11	Academics' compensation as a percentage of total expenditure in public HEIs (%)	96
Figure 4.1	The evolution of the total number and types of Romanian higher education institutions (1990–2023)	110
Figure 4.2	The evolution of the faculties of Romanian higher education institutions (1990–2023)	113
Figure 4.3	Government expenditure on education (% of GDP)—Romania, Hungary, Slovakia	114
Figure 4.4	The evolution of the number of students enrolled in Romanian higher education institutions (1990–2023)	117
Figure 4.5	Ratio of students-to-academic staff, by type of institution (1990–2023)	118
Figure 4.6	Academic staff in higher education institutions, by academic year (1990–2023)	120
Figure 4.7	Academic staff in higher education institutions by macro-regions, development regions, and counties (2022–2023 academic year)	121
Figure 4.8	Female and male academic staff in the Romanian higher education (1990–2023; in percentages)	124
Figure 4.9	Distribution of academic staff in Romania by age groups (2022/2023 academic year)	125
Figure 4.10	Distribution of academic staff in Romania by age groups (2012–2023; in percentage)	126
Figure 4.11	Academic staff in Romanian higher education institutions, by academic rank (2000–2022; in numbers)	127
Figure 4.12	Academic staff in Romanian higher education institutions, by academic rank (2021–2022 academic year; in percentage)	129

Figure 5.1	Serbian higher education system	152
Figure 5.2	Number of academics and associates	155
Figure 5.3	Distribution of academics and associates	155
Figure 5.4	Distribution of male and female academic staff	156
Figure 5.5	Distribution of academic staff by gender and title	157
Figure 5.6	Number of enrolled students vs. the number of academic staff	161
Figure 5.7	Number of students per academic staff/lecturer	162
Figure 5.8	Number of enrolled and graduated students	163
Figure 5.9	Distribution of newly enrolled male and female students	164
Figure 5.10	Distribution of newly enrolled students across Serbia's statistical regions	165
Figure 5.11	The trend of net salary bases in higher education	169
Figure 5.12	Salary comparison of public professionals in Serbia	170
Figure 6.1	Share of population aged 15 and over with tertiary education, by country	180
Figure 6.2	Number of students by field for the academic year 2022/23	186
Figure 6.3	Growth in the number of male students by age group over the past four years	187
Figure 6.4	Number of Ph.D. students in Ukraine from the regime change to the present	189
Figure 6.5	Ph.D. students in Ukraine by age group	189
Figure 6.6	Change in the number of Ukrainian academic staff over the last five years (N)	196
Figure 6.7	Distribution of academic degrees and titles among Ukrainian academics (%)	197
Figure 6.8	Share of women of academic staff in Ukraine and the Visegrád countries	197
Figure 6.9	Average salary of academic staff in Ukraine and Visegrád countries in Euro	198
Figure 10.1	Research productivity of academics over the past four years based on self-report	294
Figure 11.1	The dual functionality of humans at the personal and professional levels (Authors' design)	308
Figure 11.2	Different social environments implication on work-life imbalance (Authors' design)	317
Figure 12.1	Attitudes toward culture by average of responses to attitude questions (N=757-764)	340

List of Tables

Table 2.1	Institutions, faculties, number of students (short-term, tertiary, bachelor, master and undivided, and doctoral) and number of academics	48
Table 2.2	Distribution of academic staff working in higher education by age	53
Table 2.3	Structure of academic staff in Hungarian higher education	61
Table 2.4	Salary ratios of academics' degrees in higher education (Data around 2015–16)	64
Table 2.5	Ranking of countries by world share of doctoral students and number per 100,000 inhabitants	66
Table 3.1	The number of HE students per academic staff in 2020	81
Table 3.2	The changes in numbers of HEIs, their students, and academics in Slovakia (2015–2023)	83
Table 3.3	Age distribution of academic staff/senior staff (OECD and Slovakia)	84
Table 3.4	The age structure of HEI staff in Slovakia—% (2024)	84
Table 3.5	Distribution of academic staff by seniority (% in 2020)	86
Table 3.6	Distribution of academics in HE due to their academic degrees (Between 2003 and 2023, Slovakia)	87
Table 3.7	The salary ratios of academics rank in HE in Slovakia (2022)	97
Table 4.1	Higher educational institutions by macro-regions, development regions, and counties, types (2022/2023 academic year)	112
Table 4.2	The largest higher education centers (2022/2023 academic year)	112

LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.3	The largest higher education centers, by academic staff numbers (2022/2023 academic year)	122
Table 4.4	The largest private higher education centers, by academic staff numbers (2022/2023 academic year)	123
Table 5.1	Number of higher education institutions	159
Table 5.2	Distribution of enrolled students in public and private higher institutions	160
Table 5.3	Distribution of academic staff in public and private higher institutions	160
Table 5.4	Descriptive statistics of students-to-academic staff and students-to-lecturer	162
Table 5.5	The transition from vocational colleges to academies of applied studies	166
Table 5.6	Distribution of higher education institutions	167
Table 5.7	Complexity coefficients for financing the salaries	168
Table 6.1	Higher education institutions and student numbers (Undergraduate, bachelor, master, and postgraduate)	182
Table 7.1	Types of institutional culture and its characteristics	219
Table 7.2	Types of effectiveness and their characteristics	223
Table 7.3	Evaluation of the academic effectiveness of each type of institutional culture	225
Table 8.1	The teaching approach (N=818)	242
Table 8.2	The existence of teacher competencies (N=812)	242
Table 8.3	Types of inclusive teaching activity	244
Table 8.4	The teaching approaches of the academic clusters (N=770, average points)	245
Table 8.5	Types of inclusive teaching activities by academic clusters (N=758, average points)	246
Table 8.6	Interrelations between educational activity and well-being (N=720)	248
Table 9.1	The ratios of academic staff mobility by country (N= 804)	270
Table 9.2	Ratios of teaching and research mobility by academic field (N=800)	271
Table 9.3	Ratios of academic staff mobility by position (N=800)	271
Table 9.4	Ratios of academic staff mobility according to position—the Hungarian and Romanian subsample (N=615)	272

Table 9.5	Ratio of academic staff mobility according to academic degree (N=803)	272
Table 9.6	Ratio of academic staff mobility according to types of academics (N=806)	273
Table 9.7	The connection between education of foreign students and academic staff mobility. $p=0.012$ (N=772)	277
Table 10.1	Correlations of workplace stressors with research productivity (means, SD)	295
Table 11.1	The statistical values of the main components of work-related factors	310
Table 11.2	Perception of the work-life conflict (%) and the principal component factor scores	311
Table 11.3	Differences in the WLC factor by the demographic, family, and professional factors (means on 0–100 points scale)	312
Table 11.4	Multiple stepwise regression analyses. Prediction of WLC	314
Table 12.1	Cultural consumer/leisure types in Hungary from the mid-1980s to the mid-2010s	332
Table 12.2	Frequency of academics' use of cultural and leisure activities by cluster	334
Table 12.3	Frequency of use of cultural and leisure activities (%)	335
Table 12.4	Cluster groups (cluster weights 1–7) and averages of visits to cultural and leisure activities (N=679) based on the frequency of cultural and leisure activities of the academics	337
Table 12.5	Respondents by age group and cultural cluster (N=660)	338
Table 12.6	Distribution of academics by number of books read in the last year (% , persons)	339
Table 12.7	Comparison of cultural clusters with the number of non- or light readers	340
Table 12.8	Means of attitude statements on attitudes toward culture by cultural cluster (1–5 scale)	341

- Jauhiainen, A., Jauhiainen, A., & Laiho, A. (2009). The dilemmas of the “efficiency university” policy and the everyday life of university teachers. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(4), 417–428. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510903050186>>
- Katz-Gerro, T. (2011). Cross-National Cultural Consumption Research: Inspirations and Disillusions. *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 51(Special issue), 339–360.
- Kraaykamp, G., & Noieuwbeerta, P. (2000). Parental Background and Lifestyle Differentiation in Eastern Europe: Social, Political, and Cultural Intergenerational Transmission in Five Former Socialist Societies. *Social Science Research*, 29(1), 92–122.
- KSH (2000). *Életmód—időmérleg felvétel 1999/2000*. (Lifestyle-time balance survey 1999/2000.) Központi Statisztikai Hivatal.
- Laasch, O. (2017). The slow professor: challenging the culture of speed in the academy. Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 16(4), 624–626.
- Márkus, E., Miklósi, M., & Herczegh, J. (2023). Kulturális részvétel az Európai Unióban, különös tekintettel a visegrádi országokra. (Cultural participation in the European Union, in particular in the Visegrád countries). *Kulturális Szemle* 1, 7-16.
- Pavluska, V. (2014). *Kultúramarketing. Elméleti alapok, gyakorlati megfontolások* (Cultural marketing. Theoretical foundations, practical considerations). Budapest Akadémiai Kiadó.
- Pavluska, V. (2016). Milyen kultúrafogyasztók a magyarok?—A hazai kultúrafogyasztás átfogó mintázatai. (What kind of cultural consumers are Hungarians?—Comprehensive patterns of domestic cultural consumption) In A. Fehér, V. Á. Kiss, M. Soós, & Z. Szakály (Eds.), *Hitelesség és értékorientáció a marketingben*. (Authenticity and value orientation in marketing) (pp. 435-445). University of Debrecen, Faculty of Economics.
- Pavluska, V., Jakopánecz, E. & Törőcsik, M. (2018). *Kultúra—a magyar lakosság kultúrával kapcsolatos beállítódása és követett magatartása generációs szemléletű vizsgálattal—országosan reprezentatív személyes (n=2001) és online megkérdezés (n=1038) eredményei*. (Culture—attitudes and behaviors of the Hungarian population toward culture through a generational approach—results of a nationally representative face-to-face (n=2001) and online survey (n=1038). PTE KTK.
- Peterson, R. A. (2005). Problems in Comparative Research: The Example of Omnivorousness. *Poetics*, 33(5–6), 257–282.
- Peterson, R. A., & Kern, R. M. (1996). Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore. *American Sociological Review*, 61(5). 900–907.

- Piekarska-Duraj, Ł. (2020). *The Invisible Hand of Europe: The Museum as a Civilizing Tool*. Studies in European Integration, State and Society, Volume 10. Peter Lang Group.
- Roberts, K. (1999). *Leisure in Contemporary Society*. CABI Publication.
- Seaman, B. A. (2005). *Attendance and public participation in the performing arts: A review of the empirical literature*. Andrew Young School of Policy Studies Research Paper Series. SSRN Retrived from: <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=895099>
- Šebová, M., & Révészová, Z. (2020). Unveiling Trends in Cultural Participation: The Case of Slovakia. *Social Sciences* 9(19), 1-14.
- Tomšic, M. (2016). *Elites in the New Democracies*. Peter Lang Group. Retrieved from <<https://www.perlego.com/book/2943087/elites-in-the-new-democracies-pdf>>
- Vitányi, I. (1997). *A magyar társadalom kulturális állapota. Az 1996-os vizsgálat zárójelentése*. (The cultural status of Hungarian society. Final report of the 1996 investigation). Maecenas.
- Vojtíšková, K., & Lorencová, R. (2014). Public funding of culture in the Czech Republic since the fall of the iron curtain: Contemporary dilemmas. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 21(5), 529–53.
- Yaish, M. & Katz-Gerro, T. (2012). Disentangling „Cultural Capital”: The Consequences of Cultural and Economic Resources for Taste and Participation. *European Sociological Review*, 28(2), 169–185.

13. What Have We Learned About the Well-Being and Performance of Academics in EU Border Region Countries?

Klára Kovács & Ilona Dabney-Fekete

In the Introduction of this book, we examined in detail how global, international, educational policy, and organizational changes—as well as emerging new demands and expectations—have transformed the work and working conditions of academics over recent decades. Global trends in higher education (such as expansion and internationalization), along with national policy expectations aimed at increasing the competitiveness of higher education institutions and the competition for students, excellence, and resources, have made what was once a predictable and stable academic career increasingly uncertain and fragmented. This has resulted in significant diversification, stratification, and disparities among academics, despite the fact that certain career milestones are considered standardized across almost all of Europe (Kwiek & Antonowicz, 2015).

At the same time, we observe that there are significant differences among academics at similar career stages, particularly between high- and low-performing senior and junior academics, as well as across various academic disciplines. These differences are primarily shaped by institutional type, institutional goals and expectations, and research productivity (Kwiek & Roszka, 2024).

The introduction of various performance evaluation systems has further intensified competition—not only for resources but also for securing academic positions, as the stagnation of available positions coincides with an increasing number of aspiring academics. The “do-or-die” approach has not only heightened competition but has also led to high levels of frustration, uncertainty, tension, interpersonal conflicts, and distrust among academics and between academics and institutional leadership (Westerheijden, 2007). These tensions manifest significantly in differences in academic performance, attitudes toward work, and perceptions of expectations and available resources. Academics who criticize the introduction of performance evaluation systems and managerialism argue that these developments erode academic freedom and autonomy, reducing academic work to a mere commodity. However, those who have embraced and integrated these changes into their professional identities view them as providing a transparent career pathway within higher education institutions, based on clear, quantifiable criteria (Kwiek & Antonowicz, 2015).

Our interview-based research conducted in five countries (N=41) also revealed this dual nature of performance evaluation: while it makes differences in individual academic contributions and achievements more measurable, it also poses a threat to academic autonomy and weakens interpersonal relationships among colleagues. This, in turn, creates a highly competitive climate both within and between smaller academic units and significantly shapes, or even alters, the culture of higher education institutions. Furthermore, the validity of performance measurement is often called into question, as evaluation processes are not always transparent and fail to account for certain non-measurable aspects of academic work (Kovács et al., 2024; Pusztai et al., 2025).

Based on attitudes toward performance evaluation and institutional responses, we identified four distinct types of institutional cultures:

Supportive institutional cultures—These define their strength through unity, and their effectiveness is demonstrated through excellence in teaching, research, and administration.

Cohesive micro-communities—Academics within these communities share a common understanding of effectiveness and place equal importance on teaching, research, and administrative tasks, but their focus remains within their own micro-community rather than at the institutional level.

Lonely crowd institutional culture—Here, teaching plays a central role in defining effectiveness, but academics in this culture often feel isolated and left to their own devices.

Egocentric monumental institutional culture—Academics in this category prioritize individual interests, place little emphasis on teaching, take on administrative roles in exchange for remuneration, and prefer research activities (Pusztai et al., 2025).

The international trends described above have fundamentally reshaped the working conditions, opportunities, and status of academics across Europe, creating specific intra- and interpersonal challenges that have a significant impact on their well-being and performance. Our study sought to explore these macro and organizational characteristics in relation to the well-being and performance of academics in five CEE countries—Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine. This region has a unique context, shaped by a shared post-socialist legacy and a delayed yet parallel adaptation of global higher education trends, primarily influenced by developments in the U.S.A., East Asia, and Western Europe. However, these changes have unfolded differently in this region due to distinct cultural norms and practices (Mudrak et al., 2018),

as well as the enduring influence of post-communist traditions (Goncharuk & Cirella, 2022).

Despite this, research on the well-being and performance of academics in the CEE region remains significantly underrepresented (Mudrak et al., 2018), and—with the exception of Romania—these countries have largely been excluded from previous international studies (CAP, EUROAC, APICS).

The above findings highlight that the characteristics of academic work have been at the center of scholarly discourse for several years, yet CEE higher education institutions have often been overlooked in such discussions. Our research aimed to fill this gap by conducting an extensive investigation into the working conditions, job-related stressors and resources, work-life conflicts, emotional well-being, research productivity, teaching methods, and cultural engagement of academics (N=821) of higher education institutions in Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine.

In terms of well-being, beyond the traditional examination of positive and negative emotions, our research incorporated specific factors influencing academic life, such as perceptions of workplace culture, assessments of academic development opportunities, job-related stressors and resources, work-life conflicts, and cultural involvement as a source of intellectual stimulation and recreation. Additionally, we explored two key areas of professional fulfillment: international mobility and research productivity.

In our summary study, we present the key empirical findings of our research across three dimensions: by country, by job title, and by academic types. Based on insights gathered from focus group interviews conducted prior to the quantitative research, we asked respondents to what extent they considered certain tasks as part of their job. Based on their answers, we identified four distinct academic types:

Teaching-focused academics (33.4%)—These academics value teaching-related activities, including course material development, experimentation with new teaching methods, and academic research, in equal measure.

Academics with an administrative focus (19.7%)—For this group, teaching is less important than for others, but it remains a more integral part of their work than academic research. They also place a high value on collaboration with colleagues in teaching and are characterized by a strong involvement in administrative tasks.

Research-focused academics (20.3%)—Similar to teaching-focused academics, this group places high value on academic research activities, particularly international publishing and research output. However, teaching plays a lesser role in their professional activities. Like the first group, they also consider leadership and administrative responsibilities as characteristic of their role.

Academic leaders (26.6%)—This group places equal emphasis on teaching and research but is primarily defined by leadership responsibilities within the university, which are the most critical aspects of their work.

To fully understand the situation, job characteristics, well-being, and performance of academics in each country, it is essential to interpret our findings within the broader context of national higher education policies. For this reason, we conducted a macro-statistical analysis of higher education policies in the five studied countries, examining the educational policy processes of recent decades that have significantly shaped the working conditions of academics and researchers in these institutions.

1. Higher Education in the Studied Countries: Challenges and Trends

Following the political transition, the higher education systems of the examined countries had to contend with post-Soviet traditions, remnants of which are still present in the academic sphere today—albeit to varying degrees, and in different segments. Nevertheless, global trends (such as the expansion and internationalization of higher education) eventually made their way into every post-socialist country, albeit with some delay.

A common feature of the region is that, after a phase of dynamic expansion, student numbers have now entered a stagnation phase, prompting state initiatives aimed at reducing or redistributing the costs of higher education. One approach has been the promotion of private institutions, another has been the reduction of the proportion of state-funded students, and a third is recruitment-restrictive higher education policy, which has led to the lowest rates of young graduates within the EU (38% in Slovakia, 29% in Hungary, and 23% in Romania).¹ Cost-saving measures in higher education have also resulted in relatively low student-to-academic staff ratios in this region.

Additionally, in a European comparison, the region is characterized by some of the lowest academic salaries, precarious career paths, rigid and hierarchical institutional structures, a lack of transparency in grant evaluation processes, limited access to international exchange opportunities, and the implicit discrimination against women in academic careers (Drennan et al., 2020; Gould, 2006; Kwiek & Antonowicz, 2015). These factors significantly hinder talented young researchers from choosing a career in academia.

¹ <<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20220524-2>>.

In the countries of the region, the attractiveness of the academic profession has declined, leading to a decreasing number of academic staff and an aging workforce. This is further exacerbated by insufficient funding compared to international standards and other sectors, inadequate social status and recognition—particularly in the case of assistant lecturers—and increasing pressure on academics to secure funding through their performance to maintain international competitiveness.

After the political transition, the most significant challenges for higher education in the region included demographic decline combined with emigration, as well as the internationalization that gained momentum due to the Bologna Process. At the same time, the student-to-academic staff ratio decreased compared to previous years, and the number of newly established private higher education institutions increased. These institutions are characterized by specialized programs, smaller class sizes, and flexible schedules, alongside the already mentioned lower student-to-academic staff ratios. Another key factor shaping academic work is the increasing stringency of academic qualification requirements and performance criteria for academic positions, likely influenced by political direction, which is closely linked to academic qualification procedures and expectations for the quality of higher education (Hanesová et al., 2025; Kovács & Papp, 2025; Polónyi, 2024; Tódor, 2025).

In Ukraine, higher education has been shaped not only by the post-Soviet transition but also by economic, political, social, and historical processes such as the Euromaidan protests and the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Due to the massive emigration caused by the war, many higher education institutions have faced operational uncertainty, and a significant proportion of students and academics have continued their studies and work in neighboring CEE countries, primarily in Slovakia and Poland. Thus, the impact of the war on (higher) education extends far beyond national borders. Salaries for Ukrainian academics remain significantly lower than those of their counterparts in the EU and even in the Visegrád Four countries. However, academic expectations have increasingly aligned with European higher education trends, including higher performance expectations, compliance with accreditation regulations, requirements for specific programs and subjects taught, and the introduction of performance assessments (Pallay, 2025).

1.1. Academic Well-Being and Health Behaviors

According to the results of our cross-country questionnaire survey, Slovakian and Ukrainian academics report the lowest levels of well-being, while Romanian academics report the highest. Controlling for all other variables, being from Romania was a positive predictor of well-being (Kovács et al., 2024b). This may be linked to

the higher average subjective well-being of the Romanian population in a regional comparison, as indicated by the World Happiness Report, where Romania ranks 24th globally, with only the Czech Republic ranking higher within the region (Helliwell et al., 2023). Conversely, the well-being of Ukrainian respondents was significantly impacted by the difficulties caused by the war in both work and everyday life. Partially aligning with these well-being results, Slovakian and Serbian academics reported feeling the healthiest, whereas Ukrainian academics reported feeling the least healthy (Kovács & Michelini, 2025).

In terms of physical activity, Serbian and Slovakian academics were the liveliest, followed by Hungarians, while Ukrainians and Romanians drew up the rear. However, Ukrainians were the most frequent users of university sports facilities in the past year (30.4%), whereas Romanians were the least frequent users (12.4%) (Kovács & Michelini, 2025). Investigating the role of physical activity is crucial, as our results indicate that academics who engage in moderate or high levels of physical activity (at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise per week) report significantly higher well-being. Regular physical activity significantly reduces perceptions of stressors such as work-life conflicts, workload, and the diversity of academic roles, thereby indirectly contributing to higher academic well-being (Kovács et al., 2025a).

1.2. Workplace Stress and Institutional Support

Academics in Serbia and Hungary had the lowest agreement that opportunities for promotion exist. Serbians, Romanians, and Slovaks reported high dissatisfaction with training and development opportunities. Respondents in Ukraine described the lowest agreement on manageable workloads, while Hungarians presented the lowest satisfaction with the annual performance appraisal process. Academics in Hungary and Romania received high ratings for colleague support. Hungarians, Serbians, and Slovaks had high levels of concern regarding the deteriorating situation of academics. Academics from Ukraine, Romania, and Serbia rated their institutional infrastructure as adequate. Romanians and Slovaks reported burdensome levels of administrative work. Serbian academics generally agreed that they had sufficient time for class preparation. Interestingly, Ukrainian respondents were the most satisfied with their working conditions, career progression opportunities, development opportunities, and social support within their institutions. There were no significant differences between countries in satisfaction with salaries. In all countries, most academics were not satisfied with the salaries provided by their higher education institutions. This question elicited the highest level of dissatisfaction, regardless of the country of origin (Kovács et al., 2025b).

1.3. International Mobility and Academic Productivity

Significant differences were found in participation in international mobility programs: Romanian and Slovakian academics were the most mobile, while Hungarian and Ukrainian academics were the least mobile (Dabney-Fekete et al., 2025). For Ukraine, this may be attributed to its non-EU status, the fact that respondents completed the survey not only near the border but also from within the country, and, naturally, the war, which has made border crossings significantly more difficult, especially for men.

The higher mobility of Romanian and Slovakian academics could be explained by the large proportion of Hungarian-speaking academics in minority institutions, who often choose Hungarian institutions due to the shared language. Additionally, many Romanian-speaking respondents live in border regions where higher education institutions are within a relatively short distance, facilitating travel.

Despite differences in mobility, no significant differences in academic productivity were found between the studied countries, suggesting that academics in the region perform at similar levels overall (Kovács et al., 2025c).

1.4. Senior vs. Junior Academics

Significant differences were observed between junior and senior academics. Associate professors reported higher levels of well-being than assistant professors or those in lower positions (Kovács et al., 2025a). Daily smoking was more common among assistant professors or lower-ranked academics (13.5%), whereas non-smokers were more prevalent among associate professors or higher-ranked academics (84.4%) (Kovács & Michelini, 2025).

Junior academics worked more hours per week, struggled more with work-life balance, and had lower research productivity (Kovács et al., 2025c). Senior academics worked fewer hours, coped better with work-life balance, received more institutional and peer support, rated their working conditions more positively, and performed better in research (Berei et al., 2025; Kovács et al., 2025b).

A significant proportion of senior academics had participated in international mobility programs, compared to only one-third of early-career academics (Dabney-Fekete et al., 2025).

2. Characteristics of Academic Clusters in Central and Eastern Europe

Our research has provided a detailed and comprehensive picture of four distinct types of academics in the CEE region, based on their working conditions, well-being, and performance indicators.

Academic leaders achieved the highest productivity scores. Despite being the most overburdened, they remain the most effective. This may be attributed to their ability to delegate certain monotonous and time-consuming administrative tasks, which are not recognized as academic performance, to others—primarily to the group we identified as academics with an administrative focus.

They excel in publishing, participating in international conferences, and engaging in international research projects. They are also the most open to internationalization (including international research projects and academic mobility). However, the heavy workload and long working hours associated with these activities significantly reduce their well-being (Kovács et al., 2025c; Dabney et al., 2025), despite their general tendency to report feeling optimistic, cheerful, and enthusiastic. Their greatest source of stress is excessive administrative work.

A higher proportion of academic leaders report that their work does not cause conflicts in their personal lives, even though they work the longest hours (Berei et al., 2025). They perceive their institutions as stable and innovation-oriented. They are the most satisfied with their salaries and firmly believe that career development opportunities are available to all academics. They also believe that there is a high level of agreement between academics and university leadership and that promotions are based entirely on performance. Furthermore, they are convinced that the annual performance evaluation process fairly reflects their achievements. However, these views differ significantly from those of other academic groups. Academic leaders report the highest levels of perceived social support. They are the least likely to consider leaving academia or to feel at risk of dismissal in the near future. Consequently, they are also the most satisfied with their working conditions (Kovács et al., 2025b; Pallay et al., 2024).

Academic leaders excel in most areas of teaching and quickly adapt to institutional and student needs. Their teaching approaches are predominantly student-oriented, development-focused, and data-driven. They also believe that institutions clearly define the framework and expectations for inclusion. They are the most aware of students from underrepresented groups and consider special allowances for these students both necessary and acceptable. They primarily implement differentiation strategies for student assessment, especially when teaching non-traditional students (Hrabéczy & Kocsis, 2025).

In terms of cultural consumption, they tend to be more passive (Márkus et al., 2025).

For *teaching-focused academics*, teaching plays a central role, but they also demonstrate outstanding performance in research. They feel the least burdened by their multiple responsibilities and are satisfied with the level of support they receive from colleagues. However, they are more dissatisfied with performance

evaluations, as most believe that too much emphasis is placed on assessment, which threatens their professional independence (Kovács et al., 2025a).

A significant proportion of this group struggles to balance work and personal life, and many report that work negatively impacts their private life. They rarely feel calm, but they generally display enthusiasm, cheerfulness, and optimism. They are the most likely to believe that their institution prioritizes the interests of its employees. They frequently discuss teaching-related issues with colleagues and demonstrate a high level of collaboration in research and publishing activities (Pallay et al., 2025).

Their teaching practices are highly practice-oriented and reflective, with a strong focus on providing up-to-date information and data during lessons. A high proportion of them are aware of students from underrepresented groups and find special allowances for these students more acceptable and necessary (Hrabéczy & Kocsis, 2025). This group has the highest proportion of academics actively engaged in cultural consumption (Márkus et al., 2025).

Research-focused academics primarily concentrate on domestic and international publishing. They are not motivated to establish interinstitutional networks, as institutional competition dominates this area. They are also the most pessimistic about leaving academia or being dismissed within the next three years (similar to teaching-focused academics) (Pallay et al., 2024).

They question the fairness of performance evaluations and promotions, but interestingly, the evaluation process itself does not cause them significant stress. They believe that there is little agreement between academics and leadership, and they perceive weak institutional support. They are the least satisfied with their working conditions and the level of social support within their institution, reporting the lowest levels of job satisfaction (Kovács et al., 2025b). They frequently experience exhaustion at the end of the workday, and few feel energized on a daily basis. A high proportion of them struggle to balance work and personal life, and many report that work negatively impacts their private lives (Pallay et al., 2024).

The group of *academics with an administrative focus* has the highest proportion of academics who do not yet hold a doctoral degree. Their work has the least impact on their private lives, but they express the most uncertainty regarding job satisfaction. They exhibit low levels of collaboration with colleagues in most areas, including discussions on educational and research topics, joint projects, and providing assistance to peers (Pallay et al., 2024). Their teaching practices are practice-oriented and student-centered (Hrabéczy & Kocsis, 2025).

They are significantly overrepresented among those who feel excessive pressure regarding publishing and grant writing. For them, performance evaluations represent the greatest source of stress, and they do not perceive their workplace

as stable. They are the least satisfied with promotion and career development opportunities (Kovács et al., 2025b), partly because they achieve the lowest research performance. It would be beneficial to develop supportive career development programs for this group, involving senior academics, to enhance their research effectiveness alongside their teaching and administrative responsibilities.

Academics with an administrative focus were also found to be the most open to cultural consumption (Márkus et al., 2025).

3. How Can the Well-Being and Performance of Academics in Central and Eastern Europe Be Improved? Recommendations for Higher Education Leaders and Policymakers

Overall, our findings highlight that academic well-being and effective performance require both financial support and greater recognition of teaching and administrative work, which should also be reflected in performance evaluation systems. Institutions should offer diverse support to enhance the research careers and publication activities of committed academics.

Key challenges include work-life conflicts, excessive workloads, intense publication pressure linked to performance evaluations, and lack of transparent institutional goals and expectations. These pose significant stressors and challenges for academics. Therefore, institutions should provide programs to support academic career development, time management skills, and mental well-being, particularly for researchers. It is also crucial for academics to fully understand the purpose, structure, and consequences of performance evaluation systems and to have a voice in institutional decision-making processes to ensure their interests are represented.

Significant differences exist between senior and research-focused academics in terms of perceptions of academic work, recognition, satisfaction, and institutional and peer support. This highlights the urgent need for dialogue and engagement between different academic groups and university leadership.

Acknowledgments

This publication was supported by the project “Investigating the role of sport and physical activity for a healthy and safe society in the individual and social sustainability of work ability and quality of work and life (multidisciplinary research umbrella program)” and by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

References

- Buda, A., & Kovács, K. (2024). The digital aspects of the wellbeing of university teachers. *Frontiers in Education*, 9, 1406141. <<https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2024.1406141>>
- Berei, E.B., Engler Á., & Kovács, K. (2025). Work-Life Conflicts: A Dual Functionality Approach on Career of Academics. In G. Pusztai, & K. Kovács (Eds.), *Well-Being of Academic Staff in Rapidly Changing Higher Education: A Focus on Central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 305–326). Peter Lang.
- Dabney-Fekete, I. D., Dusa Á. R., & Pallay, K. (2025). International Mobility and Its Impediments for Academics. In G. Pusztai, & K. Kovács (Eds.), *Well-Being of Academic Staff in Rapidly Changing Higher Education: A Focus on Central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 243–285). Peter Lang.
- Drennan, J., Clarke, M., Hyde, A., & Politis, Y. (2020). Academic identity in higher education. In P. N. Teixeira, & J. Ch. Shin (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of higher education systems and institutions* (pp. 35-40). Springer Netherlands.
- Goncharuk, A. G., & Cirella, G. T. (2022). Effectiveness of academic institutional models in Europe: University instructor perception case research from Bosnia and Herzegovina and France. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 36(5), 836-853.
- Gould, E. (2006). Professor or Knowledge Worker? The Politics of Defining Faculty Work. *Higher Education in Europe*, 31(3), 241–249. <<https://doi.org/10.1080/03797720601058690>>
- Hanesová, D., Lovňanová, L., & Zólyomiová, P. (2025). Higher Education Academics in Slovakia. In G. Pusztai, & K. Kovács (Eds.), *Well-Being of Academic Staff in Rapidly Changing Higher Education: A Focus on Central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 71–103). Peter Lang.
- Helliwell, J. F., Huang, H., Norton, M., Goff, L., & Wang, S. (2023). World happiness, trust and social connections in times of crisis. In *World Happiness Report* (11th ed., Chapter 2). Sustainable Development Solutions Network. URL: <<https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2023/world-happiness-trust-and-social-connections-in-times-of-crisis/>> (24.06.2024)
- Hrabéczy A. & Kocsis, Zs. (2025). (Inclusive) teaching practice and well-being among higher education academics in Central and Eastern Europe. In G. Pusztai, & K. Kovács (Eds.), *Well-Being of Academic Staff in Rapidly Changing Higher Education: A Focus on Central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 231–261). Peter Lang.
- Kwiek, M., & Antonowicz, D. (2015). The Changing Paths in Academic Careers in European Universities: Minor Steps and Major Milestones. In T. Fumasoli, G. Goastellec, & B. M. Kehm (Eds.), *Academic Work and Careers in Europe*: