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Similarities and Differences Between the Contemporary Stipendium Hungaricum Programme and International Student Mobility in Hungary During the Socialist Era

ABSTRACT

This study provides a comprehensive comparative quantitative and policy analysis of inbound international student mobility in Hungary, tracing historical trends from the socialist era (1960–1990) to contemporary developments in the 2024/2025 and 2025/2026 academic years. The results indicate a profound expansion and geographic realignment: the number of international students doubled from 23,000 in 2013 to 49,000 by 2025, while the primary sending region shifted from Europe (72% in 2010) to Asia (46% by 2025). The study concludes that, although both the socialist-era framework and the modern Stipendium Hungaricum (SH) programme rely on state-driven bilateral cooperation, their institutional impacts differ significantly. Student mobility during the socialist era remained a localized foreign policy instrument with minimal structural impact, characterized by Hungarian-language instruction and strict return policies. In contrast, the SH programme serves both foreign policy and higher education development objectives, driving systemic internationalization, the expansion of foreign-language (predominantly English) curricula, and integration into global labour markets. By providing a long-term longitudinal overview extending to 2026, this study contributes to the literature by contextualizing modern state-funded mobility programmes within broader geopolitical shifts and institutional transformations in Central European higher education.

Keywords: higher education, Hungary, international students, Stipendium Hungaricum, student mobility

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INTRODUCTION

International student mobility in higher education, particularly in Hungary, is currently a highly topical and, at times, contentious issue that is frequently the subject of political debate. This is exemplified by the exclusion of two-thirds of Hungarian students from the Erasmus+ programme and by the rapid increase in the number of international students in the Netherlands following Brexit, which sparked public debate over reducing the number of English-taught programmes and, consequently, limiting the influx of international students. Student mobility can and should be examined from numerous perspectives, depending on whether the focus is on outbound or inbound mobility, short- or long-term mobility, the motivations and objectives underlying mobility, or its impact on individuals (including their competences, skills, and career trajectories), higher education institutions, student communities, academic staff, and institutional processes. Furthermore, it encompasses bilateral state cooperation, soft power and public diplomacy, the perceived or actual objectives of both sending and receiving countries, and the subsequent effects on their respective labour markets.

The dynamic growth in the number of international students has led to a substantial increase in the volume of literature on international student mobility (Brooks & Waters, 2013; Findlay et al., 2012; Gürüz, 2008; Kehm & Teichler, 2007; Solimano, 2008; in Hungary: Berács et al., 2009; Rédei, 2007). Some studies approach mobility from the perspective of individual decision-making and the factors influencing these decisions (Dreher & Poutvaara, 2011), while others analyse student mobility from the perspectives of gender (Kofman et al., 2001; Moskal, 2016), economic factors (Beine et al., 2017; Krieger & Lange, 2010), or cultural and social dimensions (King & Raghuram, 2013; Beech, 2015). Another strand of research focuses on globalisation and internationalisation (Teichler, 2004). These studies examine, amongst other issues, the increasingly intense competition for cultural capital (Murphy-Lejeune, 2003; Waters, 2006), the effects of branding strategies adopted by universities and host countries (Joseph et al., 2012; Lomer et al., 2018), and the role of university rankings (Jöns & Hoyler, 2013), whilst also presenting critical perspectives on the neoliberal corporatisation of universities (Castree & Sparke, 2000).

Another important area of research examines the impact of international students on the host country's economy (Alpek et al., 2022; Alpek et al., 2025). This is complemented by analyses of geopolitical influences (M. Császár et al., 2023). Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of academic studies examining inbound student mobility in Hungary, largely driven by the growing emphasis placed on mobility within various funding programmes (TÁMOP, EFOP, Stipendium Hungaricum). The Tempus Public Foundation publishes annual statistics and reports on the programmes it administers. Beyond statistical analyses, recent studies on the subject (M. Császár et al., 2021) examine the distribution of international students by field of study, level of study, higher education institution, and geographical origin.

Despite the growing body of literature on international student mobility, comparatively little attention has been paid to the historical transformation of inbound student mobility in Hungary, particularly to the relationship between the socialist-era model of international student recruitment and the contemporary system shaped by globalisation and state-supported scholarship schemes. Therefore,

this study examines the origins of inbound mobility in Hungarian higher education, focusing on the so-called socialist model that emerged during the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the restructuring of international student flows following Hungary's global opening in the 2010s. Particular attention is paid to the Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship programme during the two most recent academic years in order to highlight the principal similarities and differences between these two historical periods.

METHODS

This study provides a comparative quantitative overview of inbound international student mobility to Hungary. It contrasts historical trends from the 1960–1990 period with contemporary developments in the 2024/2025 and 2025/2026 academic years, while also tracing the evolution of the Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship programme since its inception in 2013. Drawing on the FIR-OSAP database and the relevant *Statistical Yearbooks*, the paper analyses the distribution of international students by country of origin, continent, level of study, and higher education institution. Furthermore, it provides a detailed analysis of Stipendium Hungaricum (SH) scholarship recipients, focusing on data from the 2024/2025 and 2025/2026 academic years.

RESULTS

The Internationalisation of Hungarian Higher Education During the Socialist Era

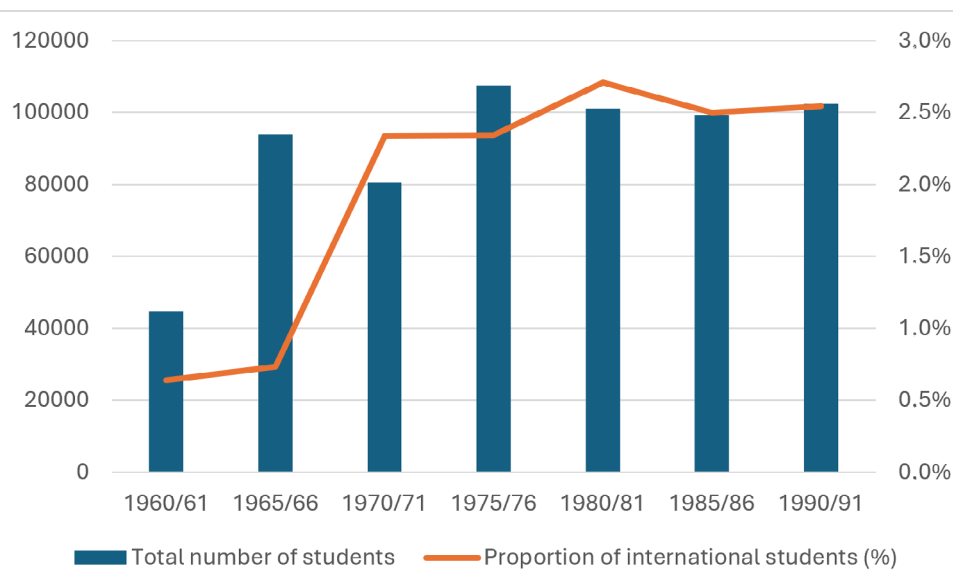
Although Hungarian higher education has a history spanning more than six and a half centuries, beginning with the university founded in Pécs by King Louis I (Lajos I), it was the major universities established during the final decades of the nineteenth century that formed the country's first robust higher education network. Much of this network, however, found itself outside Hungary's borders following the First World War. Consequently, one of the principal objectives of post-Trianon policy was to strengthen the country in the cultural sphere (Dányi, 2000). Following the First World War, the relocation of universities from the lost territories to the new national borders laid the foundations for several university centres that continue to operate today (Jávorffy-Lázok & Tésits, 2020). From the 1920s onwards, Hungary, situated within the ring of the Little Entente, became increasingly isolated in terms of foreign policy. Efforts to overcome this isolation focused partly on promoting Hungarian culture abroad and partly on ensuring that Hungarian scholarship recipients pursued their studies abroad within an organised and supervised framework. The establishment and re-establishment of the Rome- and Vienna-based *Collegium Hungaricum* institutions also served this purpose. Ultimately, Hungarian cultural policy did not prioritise the introduction of international cultural values into the country; consequently, the number of foreign students studying in Hungary remained relatively low, even in comparison with the domestic student population, which itself was modest by today's standards. Following the First World War, the student population numbered approximately 14,000,

but it gradually declined over the following decades. By the 1937/38 academic year, immediately before the outbreak of the Second World War, only 13,000 students were enrolled in Hungarian higher education institutions (Romsics, 2017).

The Hungarian education system underwent another profound transformation following the Second World War. Alongside the establishment of a new public education system, higher education also experienced a comprehensive ideological and structural reorganisation (Dányi, 2000). From the late 1940s onwards, as communist Hungary became almost entirely detached from the Western world, its international relations were largely confined to the socialist bloc and countries maintaining friendly relations with it. This orientation was reflected throughout the academic sector, including the international networks of higher education institutions (Dányi, 2000). The forced restructuring of higher education, like that of the economy and several other social subsystems, was implemented through centrally planned quotas. For example, the Five-Year Plan for 1950–1954 specified the number of students to be admitted to higher education. According to the plan, the student population of just over 23,000 was to be doubled gradually, albeit at a rapid pace, by the end of the planning period. The target for 1952 alone was already 45,000 students, and by September 1952 nearly 46,000 students had been admitted to Hungarian colleges and universities (Keresztes, 2020). This rapid expansion began to slow following the consolidation of the Kádár regime in the early 1960s, and the overall number of students in Hungarian higher education remained largely unchanged until the collapse of the socialist system. Apart from minor fluctuations, enrolment remained at approximately 100,000 students for several decades. It was only after the political transition that Hungarian higher education once again opened to much broader segments of society. Throughout the socialist period, Hungarian higher education functioned as a relatively closed and elitist system.

The internationalisation of Hungarian higher education began in parallel with the stabilisation of the Kádár regime. During the subsequent period of political stability, particularly from the 1970s onwards, Hungary's foreign policy priorities became increasingly evident in the changing geographical composition of the international student population. In many cases, fluctuations in the number of students arriving from particular friendly countries reflected developments in Hungary's international relations. The number of international students increased exponentially over an extended period. Beginning in the early years of the Kádár era, international student enrolment experienced sustained and substantial growth for approximately fifteen years. Hungary's growing engagement in Africa and Asia also created new opportunities for higher education, as student exchange programmes enabled the education of specialists and future leaders from countries with limited or non-existent higher education systems to take place largely within socialist countries, including Hungary. At the same time, Hungarian academics and researchers gained opportunities to become familiar with partner countries and to contribute to their reconstruction (Horváth, 2023). This remarkable momentum began to weaken only during the second half of the 1970s. Following the turn of the decade, the long-standing upward trend reversed for the first time during the Kádár era, and the overall number of international students began to decline. Nevertheless, the proportion of international students relative to the total higher education student population remained stable from the 1970s until the end of the socialist period, accounting for approximately 2.5–2.7% of all students (Figure 1).

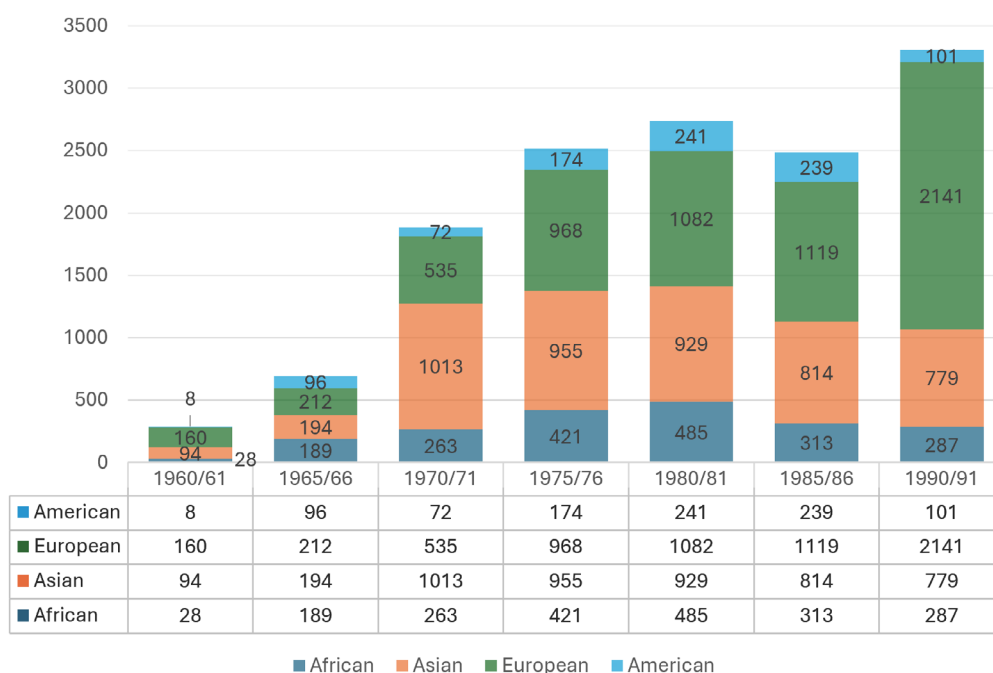
Figure 1. Number of Students Enrolled in Higher Education Institutions in Hungary and the Proportion of International Students, 1960–1990.



Source: Based on Statisztikai Évkönyv (1965, 1970, 1975, 1980, 1985, 1990) and Szemerszki (2005), edited by R. Izmindi.⁵

Whilst the decolonisation movements in Africa and Asia, which had been gaining momentum since the 1950s, contributed to the increase in the number of international students during the 1960s and 1970s, the introduction of German- and subsequently English-language medical programmes (primarily targeting European students) responded to market demand. In the 1990s, ethnic Hungarians from neighbouring countries also began to appear in Hungarian higher education.

Figure 2. Number of International Students in Hungary by Continent of Origin, 1960–1990.

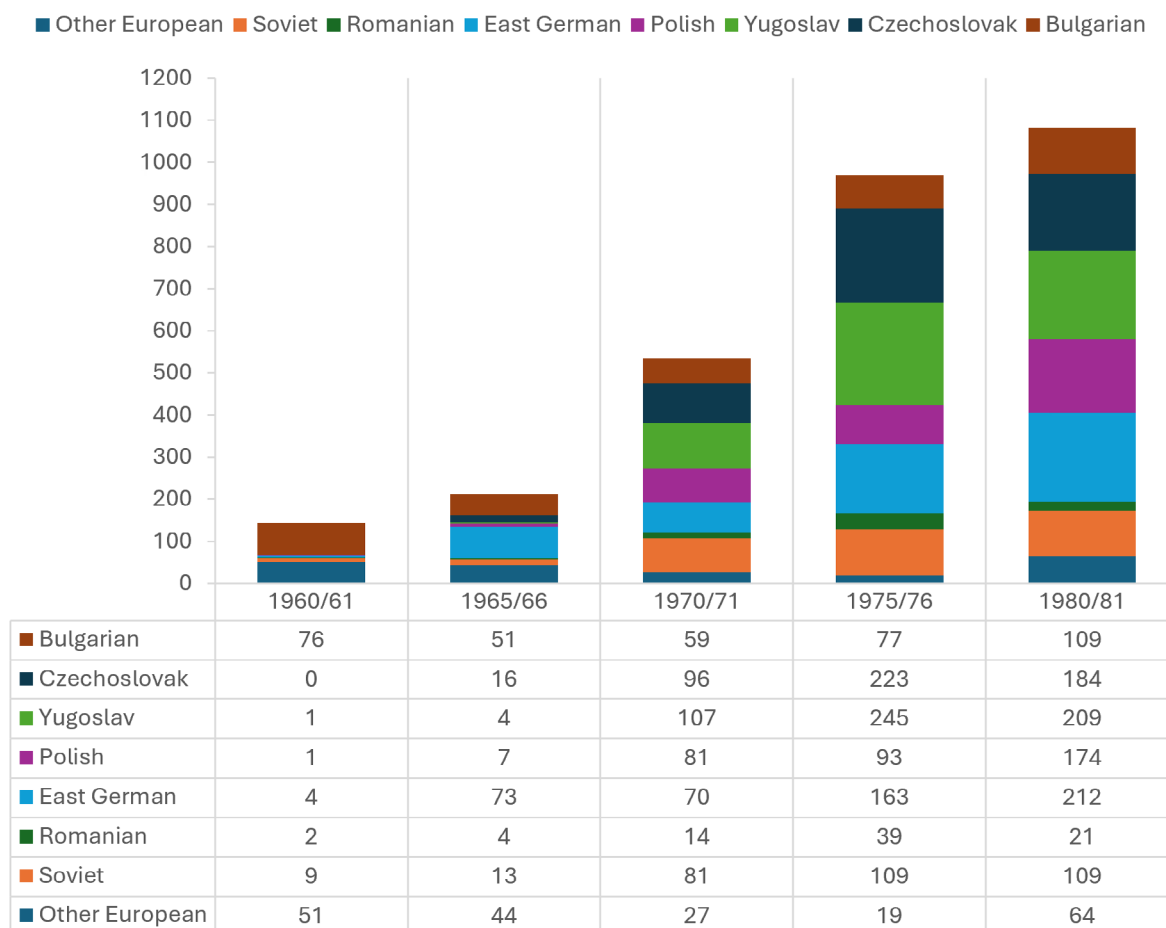


Source: Based on Statistical Yearbooks and Szemerszki (2005); compiled by R. Izmindi.

⁵ Based on data from Statisztikai Évkönyve (1965, 1970, 1975, 1980, 1985, 1990) and (Szemerszki 2005).

Between 1965 and 1980, the number of students arriving from European socialist „friendly” countries increased steadily, although at varying rates. Significant differences can also be observed when comparing the continental origins of incoming students. Although the scale of growth differed, similar trends characterised students arriving from Africa and the Americas. Whilst the number of students from these two continents increased by approximately two and a half times over the fifteen-year period (1965–1980), the number of European students grew at roughly twice that rate, increasing fivefold overall. Only students arriving from Asia followed a different pattern. After a period of rapid growth during the second half of the 1960s, their numbers began to decline slightly from the 1970s onwards, followed by a more pronounced decrease. These developments may have been closely related to the geopolitical situation in Southeast Asia, including the outbreak and escalation of the Vietnam War and the subsequent establishment of a unified socialist Vietnam, which reshaped the regional balance of power (Figure 2).

Figure 3. Total Number of International Students from Europe Studying at Higher Education Institutions in Hungary, by Major Country of Origin, 1960–1980.



Source: Based on Statistical Yearbooks and Szemerszki (2005); compiled by R. Izmindi.

Although the number of students arriving from Europe grew more rapidly than those from other continents during the Kádár era, notable differences emerge when individual countries are examined. As expected, the majority of students came from Eastern Europe, particularly from the countries of the socialist bloc. However, considerable variation existed within this group from the 1960s onwards

(Figure 3). At the beginning of the Kádár era, Bulgarian students constituted the largest share of European students studying in Hungary. Overall, fewer students arrived from the rest of the Balkans, and neither Romania nor Yugoslavia sent substantial numbers of university students. During the 1950s, the notoriously poor political relations between Hungary and Yugoslavia appear to have had a lasting negative effect on cultural and higher education cooperation. However, the number of Yugoslav students increased dramatically around the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. In other words, following the easing of political tensions between the two countries, students from Yugoslavia increasingly took advantage of the opportunity to pursue higher education in Hungary.

It is noteworthy that Romania, which had a population of approximately 21 million at the time, including an estimated 1.5 million ethnic Hungarians, sent remarkably few students to Hungary throughout the entire socialist period. When neighbouring countries with sizeable Hungarian minority populations are considered together, it becomes evident that the number of students arriving from these communities remained relatively modest. Although Hungarian served as the language of instruction for international students, ethnic Hungarians from the Carpathian Basin were largely unable to benefit from this opportunity. Thus, Soviet-era foreign policy in the region, which largely disregarded minority issues, also influenced patterns of higher education mobility. Although the Soviet Union was by far the largest and most politically influential member of the socialist bloc, the number of students arriving from the Soviet republics remained low relative to its population, amounting to only around one hundred even during the 1970s.

Growing interest in Hungarian universities was particularly evident in two countries: Poland and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Whereas fewer than ten Polish students were enrolled in the mid-1960s, more than eighty had arrived only five years later, and by the early 1980s their number had more than doubled. The largest number of international students came from the GDR, despite its population being only around one and a half times that of Hungary. Moreover, this trend continued uninterrupted for more than two decades, with the number of GDR students reaching approximately two hundred by the 1980s. This coincided with the period during which relations between the two German states improved as a result of the Federal Republic of Germany's *Ostpolitik*, while Hungarian–West German relations also strengthened considerably. A turning point came during the political transition of the early 1990s, when the number of non-Hungarian citizens enrolled in higher education increased sharply. At the same time, German-language medical education had already been introduced at SOTE (Semmelweis University of Medicine) in the early 1980s, followed by the launch of English-language medical programmes at Semmelweis, Pécs, Szeged, and Debrecen by the end of the decade.

Current Mobility Trends in Hungary

Growth in the Number of International Students

From the 1990s until the 2010s, international students in Hungary primarily belonged to two groups: ethnic Hungarians from neighbouring countries studying in Hungarian and medical students enrolled in English- or German-language programmes (mainly from Europe, but also in significant numbers

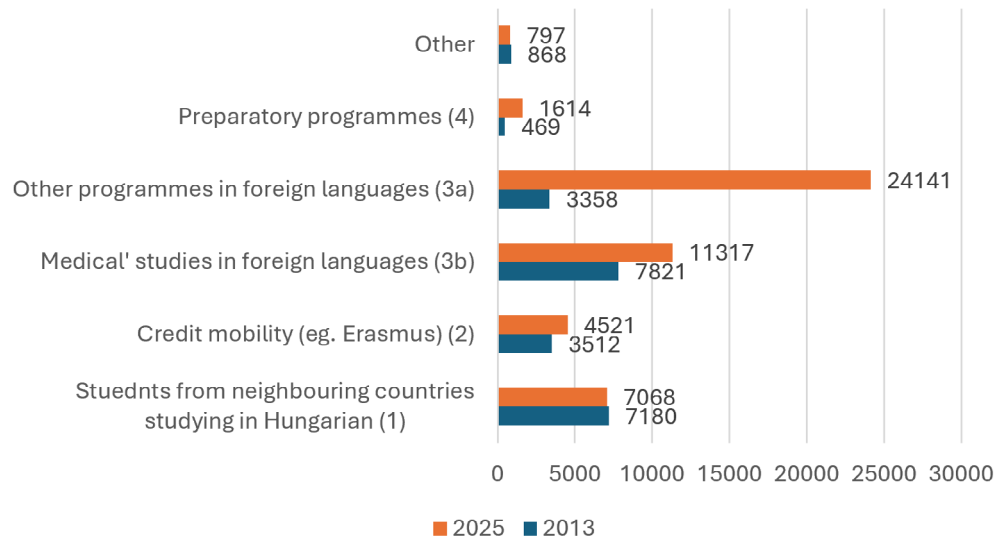
from Iran and Israel). Following Hungary's accession to the European Union, these groups were joined by students participating in the predecessor programmes of Erasmus+ (Socrates, LLP-Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus, Tempus I–IV), as well as numerous other scholarship and mobility schemes. Neither ethnic Hungarian students from neighbouring countries nor students enrolled in foreign-language medical programmes brought about comprehensive structural change within Hungarian higher education, although the latter generated substantial revenue and introduced transferable good practices at certain universities. Ethnic Hungarian students from neighbouring countries largely integrated into the Hungarian higher education system, whereas English- and German-language medical programmes remained clearly separated from Hungarian-language education. Consequently, there was little interaction between these student populations, and—with a few notable exceptions—the good practices developed within these programmes rarely spread to other faculties or disciplines. As a result, in most academic fields, the development of foreign-language programmes and related institutional services has been closely linked to European funding. Whereas in 2000 only a few dozen international students participated in Erasmus mobility, by 2015 more than 4,000 Erasmus students were studying in Hungary, and by 2019 their number had reached a peak of almost 5,000. Nevertheless, these short-term mobility programmes did not produce systemic institutional change. Instead, developments remained largely isolated within individual universities or faculties and only rarely formed part of a coherent institutional strategy.

Up to 2013, international students in Hungarian higher education can therefore be divided into three main groups: (1) ethnic Hungarian students from neighbouring countries studying in Hungarian; (2) international students participating in short-term credit mobility through scholarship programmes (predominantly Erasmus); and (3) degree-seeking international students enrolled in full-time foreign-language programmes. The latter category can be further divided into (3a) self-funded students who finance their own studies, predominantly in English-language programmes, and (3b) students enrolled in medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, and veterinary medicine, disciplines that have attracted international students for several decades. The proportion of international students enrolled in foreign-language medical programmes is exceptionally high, exceeding 70% (Figure 4).

A comparison of the 2013 and 2025 data clearly demonstrates that, over the course of just over a decade, not only has the number of international students more than doubled—from 23,000 to 49,000—but the composition of the international student population has also changed substantially. Although the number of ethnic Hungarian students arriving from neighbouring countries to study in Hungarian has remained relatively stable (7,180–7,068), their share of the international student population has declined from 31% to 14%. This stagnation is likely attributable both to the declining number of ethnic Hungarians living abroad and to the strengthening of Hungarian-language higher education institutions in neighbouring countries. Although the number of students participating in short-term mobility programmes (predominantly Erasmus) has increased (3,500–4,500), their proportion has fallen from 15% to 9%, as the expansion of this group has not kept pace with the growth in full-degree international students. The latter group increased from 11,000 to 35,000 students, representing more than a threefold increase, while its share rose from 48% to 72%. Within this category, alongside an almost 50% increase in the long-established medical sub-group (medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, and

veterinary medicine), undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programmes in other academic fields experienced a tenfold increase in enrolment.

Figure 4. Student Groups Within the International Student Population in Hungarian Higher Education, 2013 and 2025.



Source: OH FIR 2013/14 Fall; OH FIR 2025/26 Fall. Edited by G. Dobos.

The growth in the number of international students has coincided with a decline in the number of Hungarian students enrolled in higher education over the past decade (M. Császár et al., 2021). As a result, the proportion of international students increased from 3.4% in 2001 to a peak of 14.4% in 2022 and has stabilised at around 14% over the past three years. At the national level, this already represents a substantial presence within Hungarian higher education. At several institutions—including the University of Veterinary Medicine, Semmelweis University (49–37%), Corvinus University of Budapest (24%), the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music, the University of Pécs, and the University of Debrecen (22%)—international students account for more than 20–25% of total enrolment, indicating significant structural and institutional transformation. The rapid growth in the number of international students has been driven primarily by the Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship programme, established in 2013 (Figure 5).

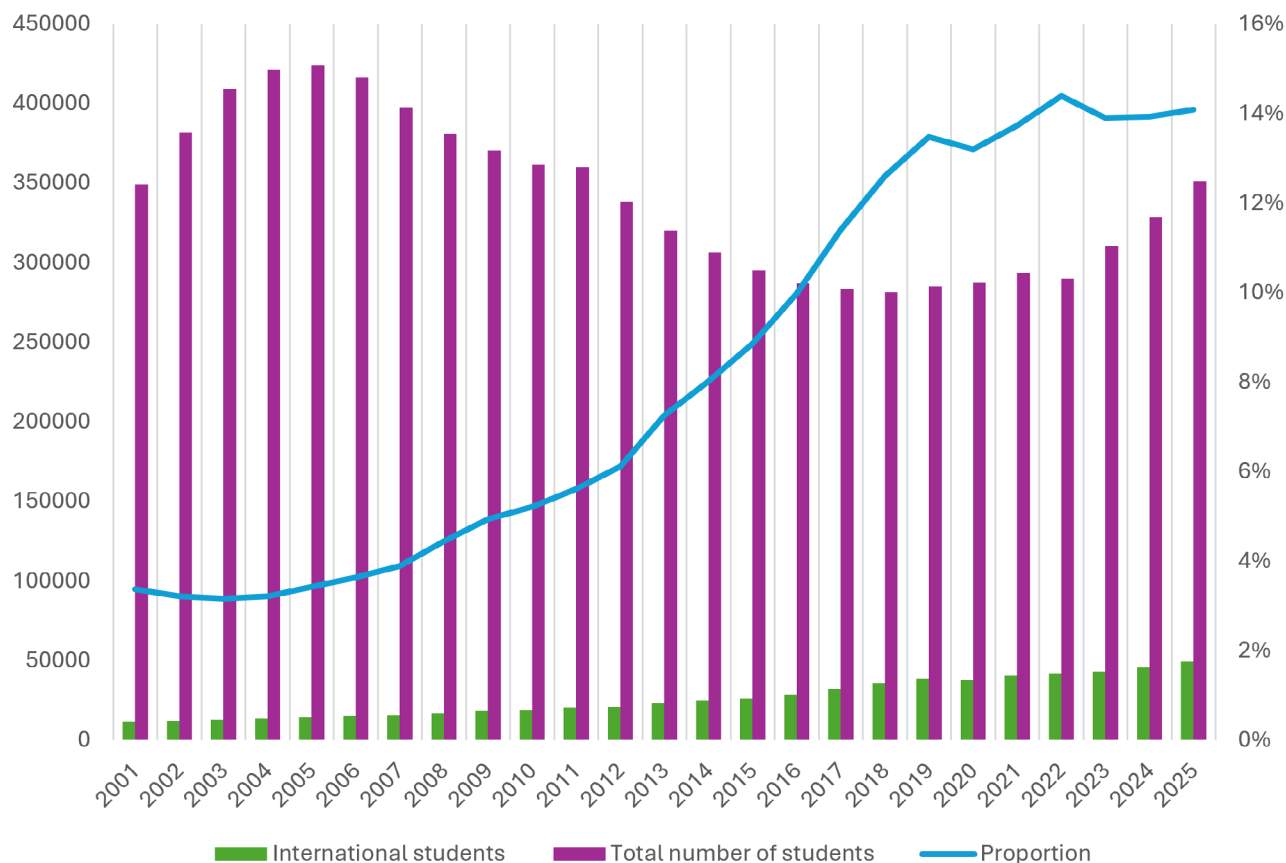
Where Do International Students Come From?

The international recruitment base of Hungarian higher education has expanded considerably over the past decade and a half. This expansion is reflected not only in the growing number of international students but also in the changing continental composition of the incoming student population (Figure 6).

The data clearly show that, in 2013, Hungarian higher education remained predominantly Europe-oriented, whereas by 2025 Asia had become the largest source region, accounting for 46% of all international students, while the share of European students had fallen to 36% (compared with 72% in 2010). The number of African students increased almost fourteenfold compared with 2010. Whereas students from approximately 150 countries and political entities were enrolled in Hungarian

higher education during the 2013/2014 academic year, by 2025/2026 Hungarian universities welcomed students from around 180 countries and territories worldwide.

Figure 5. Total Number and Proportion of Domestic and International Students in Hungarian Higher Education, 2001–2025.



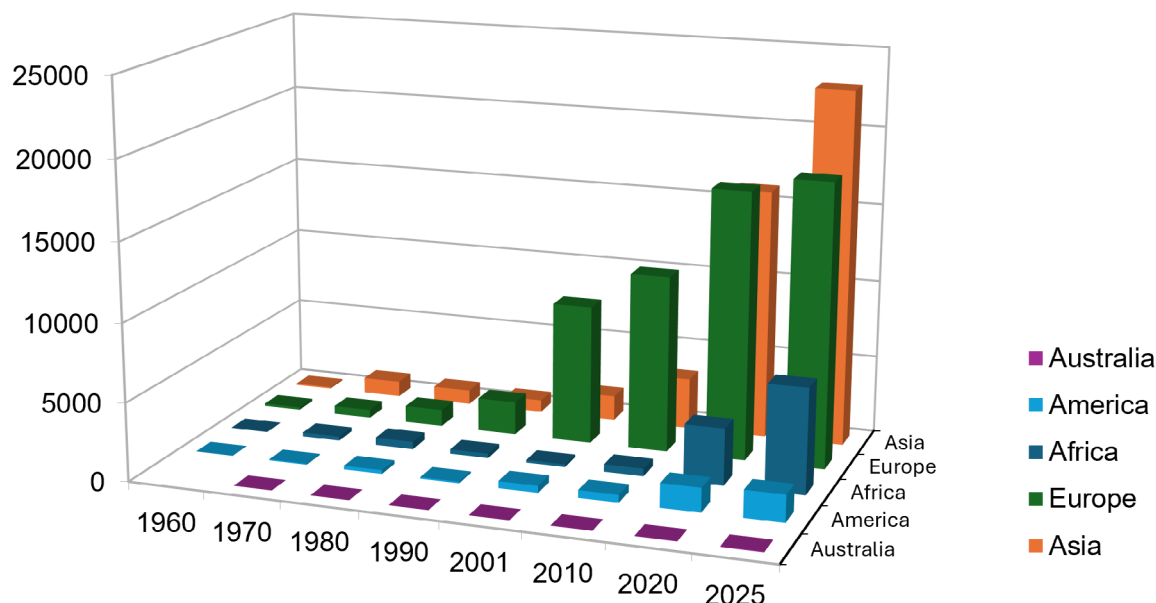
Source: OH FIR; compiled by G. Dobos.

Several patterns can be identified in the distribution of international students by country of origin (Figure 7). First, the number of students is strongly influenced by the population size of the sending country. Countries with populations of around or more than 100 million inhabitants naturally tend to send larger numbers of students, as is the case globally. However, this relationship is not universal. Even when considering only countries sending at least 500 students, several exceptions emerge. It is evident that the principal sending countries are concentrated in Eurasia. None of the highly populated countries in the Americas (such as Brazil or Mexico) belong to this group, and, with the exception of several African countries (including Egypt, Nigeria, Kenya, and Tunisia),

African countries generally contribute relatively smaller numbers of students. The leading sending countries include both highly developed economies (Germany, France, Japan, and South Korea) and developing or emerging economies (Pakistan, India, Nigeria, China, Iran, and Jordan). This pattern is consistent with broader international trends. On the one hand, developed economies increasingly utilise more cost-effective forms of international knowledge acquisition. On the other hand, developing countries seek to accelerate their socio-economic development by participating in the international higher education market, often because of limited domestic higher education capacity. This pattern—

the movement of students from less developed to more developed higher education systems—is also a well-established feature of global educational migration.

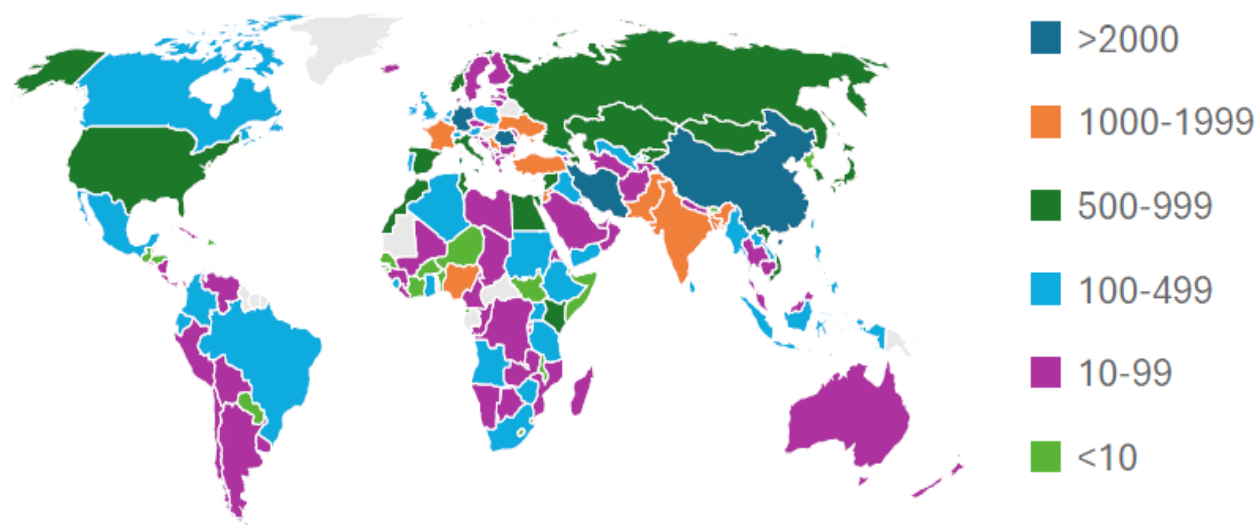
Figure 6. International Students in Hungary by Continent of Origin, 1960–2025.



Source: OH FIR; Statistical Yearbooks; compiled by R. Izmindi and G. Dobos.

Another clearly identifiable geographical characteristic is the strong student mobility originating from Hungary's neighbouring countries. In this case, the Hungarian minority communities of the Carpathian Basin account for several thousand international students. More than 1,000 students arrive from Slovakia (Upper Hungary/Felvidék), Ukraine (Transcarpathia), Romania (Partium and Transylvania), and Serbia (Vojvodina). The data also demonstrate that geographical proximity generally plays an important role in students' choice of destination country. Of the 14 countries represented by at least 1,000 students, nine are located in Europe or the Middle East; only China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nigeria are situated outside this broader region (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Categories of International Student Numbers in Hungarian Higher Education by Sending Country, Academic Year 2025/26 (Fall).



Source: OH FIR, 2025. Edited by G. Dobos.

A comparison of the ten largest sending countries with the corresponding data for the 2013/2014 academic year (Table 1) reveals several noteworthy changes. Over the past decade, the geographical composition of the largest sending countries has undergone a substantial transformation. China, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan have joined the leading source countries, while, somewhat unexpectedly, France and Spain have also emerged as major sending countries, despite the reputational challenges faced by Hungarian higher education following the exclusion of universities operated by public interest asset management foundations (KEKVA) from the Erasmus+ programme in 2022.

Table 1. The Largest Sending Countries in Hungarian Higher Education, 2013 and 2025.

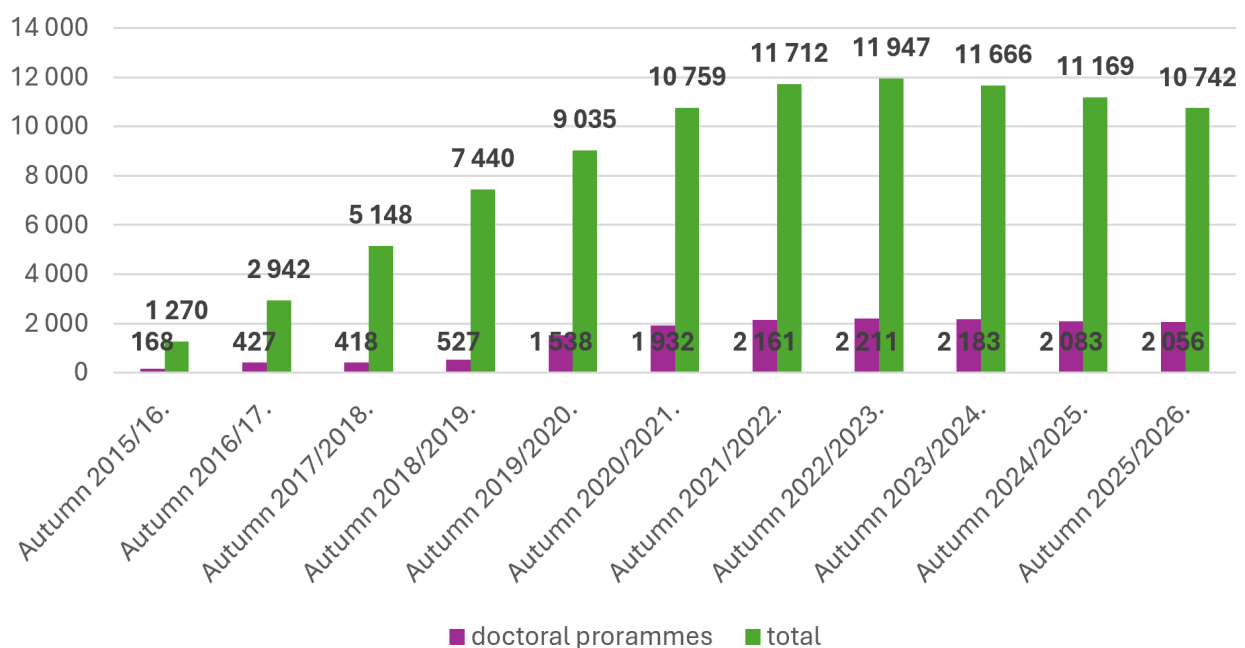
Rank	Country 2013	2013, number of international students	Country 2025	2025, number of international students2	Previous rank
1	Germany	2851	Germany	3460	
2	Slovakia	2330	China	3126	15
3	Romania	2253	Romania	3083	
4	Serbia	1543	Turkey	1994	
5	Ukraine	1169	Slovakia	1874	
6	Iran	988	India	1554	40
7	Norway	859	Pakistan	1548	41
8	Nigeria	827	Banglades	1509	84
9	Turkey	768	France	1025	11
10	Israel	691	Spain	716	12

Source: OH FIR 2013, 2025. Edited by G Dobos

The Stipendium Hungaricum Programme and Its Characteristics

The Stipendium Hungaricum (SH) programme, launched in 2013, marked a turning point in the internationalisation of Hungarian higher education and in the growth of the international student population. The programme was established by the Hungarian government in 2013. Since 2015, it has been coordinated by the Tempus Public Foundation and overseen by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade (with the exception of the 2015–2019 period, when responsibility for the programme was transferred to the ministry responsible for higher education). The SH programme was created in the spirit of Hungary’s „Opening to the East and South” policy (its original working title was the *Global Opening Scholarship Programme*) and emerged at a time when the global market for international students was becoming increasingly diversified. Over its thirteen years of operation, the programme has expanded bilateral cooperation to include more than one hundred partners (countries, international organisations, and regional or local governments) across much of South America, Africa, and Asia. It has supported nearly 30,000 scholarship recipients, funded the education of approximately 15,000 graduates, and enrolled 10,742 scholarship holders in the 2025/2026 academic year. Among its most significant achievements are the provision of stable funding for foreign-language programmes and related support services (amounting to nearly HUF 300 billion over ten years, roughly equivalent to one full year’s state funding for Hungarian higher education during that period) and the establishment of English-language doctoral programmes. Whereas only 13 doctoral students were studying in a foreign language in 2013, this number had increased to 2,589 ten years later, of whom 2,211 were SH scholarship holders (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Number of SH Scholarship Holders, Including Doctoral Students, by Academic Year, 2015–2025.



Source: TKA (2025); edited by G. Dobos.

Driving Forces

The bilateral character of the programme resembles the student mobility arrangements of the socialist era, which were likewise based on cooperation with „friendly” countries. However, the SH programme differs substantially both in scale and in its impact on Hungarian higher education. In both cases, the underlying driving force was Hungary’s foreign policy. Before 1989, however, Hungary’s internationalisation strategy was not determined independently but was shaped by the foreign policy of the Soviet Union, particularly through educational cooperation with newly independent socialist-oriented states. By contrast, in 2013 Hungary deliberately expanded its relations with countries in the East and South in order to strengthen its foreign policy position. In many cases, the SH programme served as an instrument of soft diplomacy, facilitating the establishment or re-establishment of bilateral relations after extended periods of limited cooperation. According to some assessments, the SH programme has been one of the few consistently successful instruments of Hungary’s „Opening to the East and South” policy.

Policy Context

The most fundamental difference between the socialist intergovernmental scholarship system and the Stipendium Hungaricum programme is that the latter has been conceived not only as a diplomatic instrument but also as an integral component of higher education policy. At its launch, the SH programme drew heavily on the institutional legacy of the socialist model. Between 2013 and 2015, it was administered by the Balassi Institute, the legal successor of the International Preparatory Institute (NEI), which had become one of the key institutions of the socialist scholarship system after its establishment in 1957. Consequently, the initial design of the programme reflected the Balassi Institute’s two principal areas of expertise. As Hungary’s leading institution for teaching Hungarian as a foreign language, it initially focused on preparatory Hungarian-language education, after which scholarship holders continued their studies in Hungarian. At the same time, the experience gained through the intergovernmental scholarship programme administered by the Hungarian Scholarship Committee, which also operated within the Institute, provided an institutional model for the new programme. It soon became apparent, however, that these organisational structures—designed to serve a relatively small number of students—were unable to accommodate the government’s ambitions for the SH programme. Consequently, the programme adopted another existing model that was capable of supporting much larger student numbers within a relatively short period: the English-language preparatory programmes already operating at Hungarian medical universities.

In 2015, the programme underwent a fundamental institutional transformation. Responsibility for its operation was transferred to the Ministry of Human Resources (EMMI), which was responsible for education, and to the Tempus Public Foundation (TKA), Hungary’s principal organisation for the internationalisation of education. Between 2015 and 2019, the programme’s core institutional framework was established in close cooperation with Hungarian higher education institutions. During this period, the higher education policy foundations of the SH programme were laid, the registration of foreign-language degree programmes commenced, and comprehensive quality assurance mechanisms and student support services were introduced. As Hungary’s Erasmus+ National Agency, the Tempus

Public Foundation successfully incorporated broader European approaches to internationalisation into the operation of the programme. This institutional approach remained largely unchanged after responsibility for the programme returned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 2019.

The Programme's Instruments and Objectives

As demonstrated above, one of the principal differences between the socialist model and the SH programme is that the latter simultaneously pursues foreign policy and higher education policy objectives. At the same time, important similarities and differences can also be identified in the instruments employed by the two systems. As noted earlier, the central institution of the socialist model was the International Preparatory Institute (NEI), where international students completed a one-year Hungarian-language preparatory programme before continuing their studies at Hungarian universities and colleges. Although the Institute is generally regarded as having been established in 1966, several earlier predecessors existed, including the Korean Preparatory School founded in 1952 and the University Preparatory Programme for Foreign Scholarship Students established in 1957, which operated within ELTE as the International Preparatory College between 1964 and 1966 (Maróti, 2017). It was within the NEI that the system of teaching Hungarian as a foreign language—still widely used today—was developed. Under the socialist model, all international students studied in Hungarian. They completed the preparatory year separately and subsequently attended regular university programmes together with Hungarian students. The primary objective of the scholarship scheme was to educate qualified professionals who would subsequently contribute to the development of their home countries. Since no global labour market existed at the time, the possibility of graduates remaining abroad was not regarded as a policy objective. Although some scholarship recipients did remain in Hungary and establish families, such cases were exceptional rather than typical before 1989.

The Stipendium Hungaricum programme, by contrast, was created within the context of a globalised economy, where preparing graduates for the international labour market—or even attracting them to the Hungarian labour market—has become an unavoidable policy consideration, particularly in the context of predominantly English-language higher education. Nevertheless, during its initial phase (2015–2017), the programme did not seek to retain graduates in Hungary. Indeed, scholarship agreements initially included a requirement for recipients to return to their home countries after graduation, although this obligation was not supported by either monitoring mechanisms or sanctions. At the same time, there is a clear need to facilitate the integration of SH graduates—and, more broadly, international graduates of Hungarian higher education—into both the Hungarian and international labour markets. According to the SH graduate tracking survey, 37.3% of graduates worked in Hungary during their studies, while 23.4% planned to work in Hungary but ultimately left the country after graduation. Approximately 25% moved to a third country, whereas the majority returned to their country of origin. Prior to beginning their studies in Hungary, one-third (33.2%) of respondents had intended to remain in Hungary after graduation. During their studies, this proportion increased to 56.4%, and by graduation almost half (49.6%) planned to stay in the country (OH, TKA, 2021). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the programme and the responsible ministry took only limited initial steps to explore employment opportunities for SH graduates within the Hungarian

labour market, including the implementation of the graduate tracking survey. Nevertheless, in sectors facing persistent labour shortages, as well as in research and higher education, it appears difficult to justify not providing graduates of a publicly funded scholarship programme with opportunities to remain and work in Hungary.

The comparison presented above demonstrates that, although the Stipendium Hungaricum programme builds upon certain institutional and conceptual elements inherited from the socialist scholarship model, its objectives, instruments, and systemic impacts differ fundamentally. The main similarities and differences between the two models are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Key Similarities and Differences Between the Socialist Model of International Student Mobility and the Stipendium Hungaricum Programme

Socialist model	Stipendium Hungaricum programme
Bilateral, intergovernmental cooperation	Bilateral, intergovernmental cooperation
Hungarian-language education	Foreign-language education, predominantly in English
Expectation of return to the home country	Integration into a global labour market; potential retention of graduates
Limited institutional impact on Hungarian higher education	Significant systemic impact on higher education internationalisation
Primarily shaped by foreign policy constraints	Expands diplomatic relations and foreign policy opportunities
Central institutionalised framework: International Preparatory Institute (NEI)	Multi-level institutional framework involving TKA, higher education institutions, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Limited spillover effects beyond scholarship holders	Stimulates the development of foreign-language programmes and attracts self-funded students
Mainly a foreign policy instrument	A combined instrument of foreign policy, soft diplomacy, and higher education development

CONCLUSIONS

Although the socialist model and the Stipendium Hungaricum programme are both based on bilateral intergovernmental cooperation, they differ fundamentally in their objectives, institutional frameworks, and long-term impacts. These differences reflect the distinct historical periods, socio-economic systems, and geopolitical contexts in which the two models emerged. While inbound student mobility during the socialist era primarily functioned as an instrument of foreign policy, with limited consequences for the wider higher education system, the contemporary Stipendium Hungaricum programme operates simultaneously as a foreign policy instrument, a soft diplomatic tool, and a mechanism for higher education development. Consequently, its effects extend far beyond student mobility itself, contributing to institutional internationalisation, the expansion of foreign-language education, and the integration of Hungarian higher education into global knowledge networks.

The development of international student mobility in Hungary over the past five decades has consistently reflected broader changes in the country's foreign policy orientation. During the socialist era, international recruitment was shaped initially by the processes of decolonisation in Africa and Asia and later by cooperation with socialist "friendly" countries, particularly in Europe. In the

1980s, the emergence of German- and English-language medical programmes represented an early transition towards a more market-oriented form of internationalisation, primarily attracting European students. Following the political transition, the role of neighbouring countries and ethnic Hungarian communities became increasingly significant, while European Union mobility programmes gradually supported the expansion of foreign-language education across a wider range of academic fields.

The establishment of the Stipendium Hungaricum programme in 2013 marked a qualitative transformation in this process. Unlike previous forms of international student mobility, which were either limited in scope or concentrated within specific institutional and disciplinary contexts, SH generated systemic changes throughout Hungarian higher education. The programme contributed not only to the substantial growth in the number of international students but also to the development of English-language degree programmes, doctoral education, international student services, and institutional strategies for internationalisation. Furthermore, it broadened Hungary's recruitment base from a predominantly European orientation towards a genuinely global higher education perspective.

At the same time, the long-term success of the programme increasingly depends on how effectively Hungary can utilise the knowledge, skills, and international networks of SH graduates. In a context characterised by demographic challenges, labour shortages, and growing competition for highly skilled professionals, international graduates represent a potential resource for both the Hungarian economy and academic sector. Therefore, the future development of the programme should not only focus on attracting students but also on creating appropriate pathways for graduates who wish to continue their professional careers in Hungary. Overall, the Stipendium Hungaricum programme represents a major turning point in the history of international student mobility in Hungary. While it retains certain characteristics of earlier state-driven scholarship schemes—most notably bilateral governmental cooperation—it has evolved into a substantially different model, combining diplomatic objectives with higher education development and global engagement. The Hungarian case demonstrates how state-supported scholarship programmes can transform from instruments of international relations into drivers of structural change within national higher education systems.

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