



## **The Attitude of Students to Lifelong Learning from Gender Perspective**

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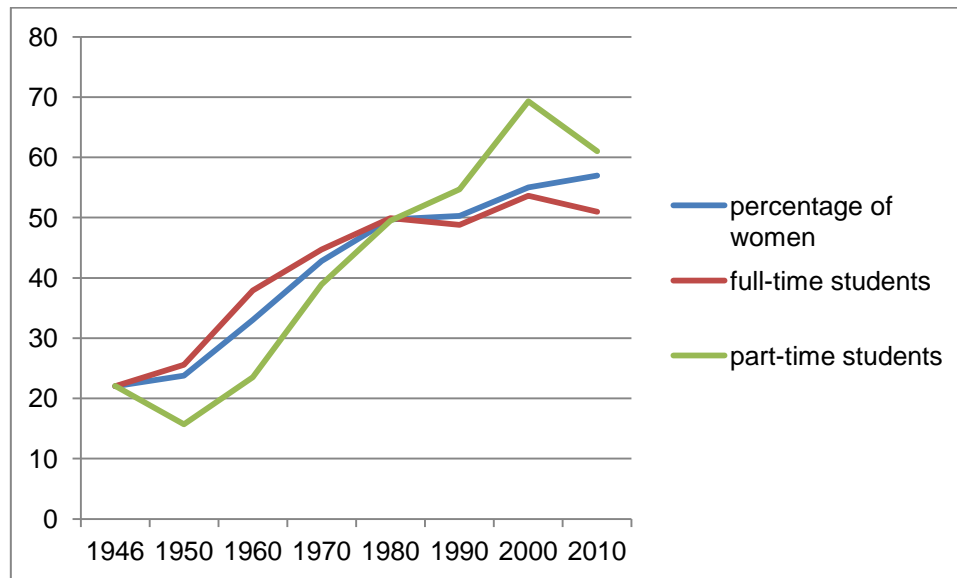
### **Abstract**

*In an international comparison the adult learning activity shows a very varied picture. Although, in the North-European countries the different methods of learning have gained high popularity, in the Middle-East-European countries, thus in Hungary, the data show a low attendance. In our study we deal with the most measurable formal training, herein we focus on the part-time higher educational students, who most of the times study next to work and family (This book was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences). We are interested in what kind of motivational factor made them start their studies, what kind of professional and private life events caused their investment in learning. The writing of this essay is based on the study named Learning Regions in Hungary: From Theories to Realities (LeaRn - This study is part of the "Learning Regions in Hungary: From Theories to Realities" research project (principal investigator: Prof. Dr. Tamas Kozma) and supported by the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (OTKA K-101867).*

### **1. Adult Learning Activity**

The learning activity of adults is usually said to be low in whole Europe, in Hungary only 6,5% of the adults take part in formal education. A great many studies tried to circumscribe the specific learning types [f.e. 1-5] There are registered datas from 1997 about the participation of the Hungarians in lifelong learning. According to the results of sample made by the Central Statistical Office it is clear that the older someone gets, the less popular the formal learning will be [6]. In higher education the correspondent courses continue to remain the most attractive for those who would like to continue learning. This is especially true for the female students whose proportion shows a rapid increase, thus they became one of the engine of the learning expansion [7]. In Hungary the women first had the opportunity for taking part in higher education in 1896, but they could choose freely among the studies only in 1946. But they compensated for their initial backlog; they are over-represented, especially in part-time education (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of women in the different sections of the higher education in Hungary



Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office

In the higher education (especially in the part-time education) it is a European phenomenon that female students are overrepresented. Berggren [8] got to an interesting result, when she found that during the investigated period (1991-2000) the economic recession oriented the youth with lower status into the school system. After the crisis, men turned to get a profession, while women increased their investments into higher education. Fényes and Pusztai have already mentioned about male-disadvantage in the feminize higher education. [9]

The achievement of students could have gender relevance as well. Leathwood shows that the independent learner types are characteristically men, because aim-focus, success-orientation and ambition have masculine features. [10] Meanwhile women demand leading, regular consultation and learning in a team. In their studies in connection with learning strategies Severiens and Ten Dam emphasize that women think more in solution-patterns, they are more open to other perspectives than men, who concentrate on their own learning process. [11]

## 2. Regional examination of part-time students

The study "Learning Regions in Hungary: From Theories to Realities" examines the different methods of learning (formal, non-formal, personal and social learning). One of the pillar of the study is formal learning, herein we deal with the non-traditional students of the higher education, and thus we did a survey about adult learners. The quality and quantity survey happened in the three main higher educational institutes of the North region of the Great Hungarian Plain in 2013. In these three institutes – University of Debrecen (UD), College of Nyíregyháza (CNY) and College of Szolnok (CSZ) – we arranged the questionnaire survey with the recording of structured interviews. The questionnaire survey was a full-scale survey among part-time students, the number of answered surveys were 1092. Analyzing the learning activity and motivation of the adults, we tried to circumscribe life events, student milestones that affected their choice of career and further education.

### 2.1 The motives of the decisions on further education

In case of higher further education as an investment it is an important momentum to reveal the decision mechanism about learning. In Table 1 we can see these reasons. According to the answers of the learners, it turns out that professional path of life and private life are interwoven. In accordance with the lesson of the interviews, sometimes they run parallel, but mostly one of them became

dominant in some periods of life. Mostly women are characterized by consideration and setting priorities, which is natural because of their female roles.

Table 1: Gender motives that led to learning decisions in adulthood, percentage

	total	male	female
In my private life I reached that time period now.	44.76	43.5	45.5
Financially it became possible only now.	34.19	32.0	35.0
In my career now is the time to acquire the new degree. **	30.79	35.2	28.9
I needed a marketable knowledge; my earlier degree was not enough.	31.25	33.4	30.4
My earlier degree is suitable, but I need specialization.*	30.70	26.6	32.6
I missed learning. ***	23.25	16.9	26.4
I want to set an example for my children. **	18.11	13.6	20.2
I comply with my parents' earlier request.	6.07	8.0	5.2

p\*\*\*=0,001 p\*\*=0,009 p\*=0,04

According to the data of the questionnaire survey, the prestige of the diploma drove almost half of the students towards higher education. The intrinsic motivation mentioned before was proved to be more determinative: interest (88% of the respondents chose it as a strong motivation), to keep intellectual freshness (89%), to enrich knowledge that they already have (89%), the love of learning (60%). The students set a low value on external motivation in connection with work: higher position, to keep their working place, the higher income was important for less than 60% of them. The results about the motivation set make the consideration of the adult learning stronger: the adult learners aim to choose a courses, with which they can get advantages in labor market, and also they can set off to a way that is suitable for their interest. The intrinsic motivation is stronger in the case of women.

We can see in Table 1 that the absence of learning motivated women significantly to start self-education. Their commitment to learning is strengthened by their success in learning. We built up an efficiency index with the use of different items (study mean, the number of postponements, attendance in classes, etc.). 22% of men and 36% of women are in the most successful group of students, in the least successful group of students this proportion is the opposite, and there is no difference between those giving an average achievement ( $p=0,000$ ). Among the estimated motives on the four-graded scale the inner ones are characteristically for the women, while men are moved by the advance in labor market.

## 2.2 Adult learning and private life

In our earlier studies with subject of adult learners we realized that those students who have family achieve significantly better results in their higher education than their single counterparts [12]. In country and regional data it could be revealed that those who raise children (whether they are men or women) are more successful in the world of higher education. Also, the relation between the size of the adult learners' family and their success is contrary to the expectations. We would assume that more children the students have, the less they can focus on their studies. This hypothesis was disproved by many studies; we cannot find any difference among the learning results of those who raise one, two, three or more children.

We tested our earlier results in the LeaRn study as well. Similar to our earlier analyses, we created success index. Looking at the genders, women are significantly more successful ( $p=0,000$ ). Those living in a marriage perform far better than others living in other kind of relationships or compared to singles ( $p=0,000$ ). In this study students with children are also more successful, in a surprising way, students with big families are the most ( $p=0,000$ ).

Based on the results it could be established that the family status, the raising of children, the size of the family do not hinder the adult learning. In fact, those who study next to a child have better learning results and more favorable willingness compared to the students without family. Blair and his

colleagues study different kind of theories that are in connection with the life cycle and learning path of adults. [14] With reference to the seven transitional period established by Aslanian and Bricknell they show that the life events in connection with family (marriage, having a child, the kids starting school etc.) have serious influence on the learning activity of the adults.[13] In the longitudinal survey study of those raising small children we showed the successful learning and professional career of women with high intrinsic motivation [15].

### 3. Conclusion

The convertibility of the competencies gained via different roles and life-spaces can be clearly demonstrated in the lives of adult learners. Competencies gained in a family life are perfectly usable in the student world; presumably it is true about the world of work as well. In the forming of the lifelong learning approach it is an important result that the success of adult learners can serve as a good example to their children. Least but not last, the demographic message of our study is also important: career and personal life can be very well harmonized with each other; the establishment of a family is neither excluding nor impedimental to the forming of a successful professional life.

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