

## Higher Educational Reforms – Institutional Responses: An Analysis of Hungarian Universities' Enrolment Policies

Rita Csőke<sup>1</sup>, Zsuzsanna Eszter Tóth<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*The government of Hungary started an all-over structural change in the Hungarian higher education system in 2011. One of the primary goals was the intention to restructure the fields of studies, namely, to increase the number of students in the fields of technology and IT, and to have less students in the fields of law and economics. On the other hand, 'the restoration of the honor of manual labor' was announced as a policy and thus resetting the priorities of different educational levels. In an earlier study, student reflections were examined where we found that the number of students significantly dropped, while the targeted restructuring did not take place. The current paper focuses on higher education institutions' behaviors also with the means of statistical analysis of officially published national data on applications, admissions and on the BSc level minimum entering scores of several Hungarian universities. Data shows that a limited institutional adaption to the governmental policy may have also taken part in the failed restructuring. Higher education institutions (in average) raised their minimum entering scores at fields of IT, technology and natural sciences, which despite the governmental aim to increase the number of students at these fields, turned to the opposite (except for IT, where some increase was experienced by the end of the examined period). This score-raising pattern was also visible at the economics and law programs of the examined universities, which is also an awkward phenomenon since these fields lost most students due to reforms. Hungarian universities (in average) just like the applicants seemed to follow their own enrolment policies irrespective of or even contrary to the governmental aims. That is, if neither potential students, nor higher education institutions correspond to a reform policy that can hardly reach its full target.*

Keywords: higher education institutional behaviour, enrolment, entering scores;

### 1. Introduction

In 2012, a major structural reform was announced in the Hungarian higher education system. One major goal was to restructure the fields of studies – namely, to decrease the number of students at fields of economics and law and to increase the number at fields of STEM studies (especially at engineering and IT). Another goal was to convert youngsters towards vocational training, thus to decrease the student number in higher education. The strongest instrument to achieve the goals was the drastic reduction of students' state financing at the fields of economics, law and social sciences. In an earlier study, students' reflections to these changes were examined, where we concluded that the result of the reform was a significantly and constantly decreasing number of applicants and admitted students, but the targeted restructuring did not take place. By 2016, the proportions of the fields of studies returned almost back to their original level (the difference to the basis year 2010 was maximum 4,9% - pedagogic studies – and minimum 3,4% - social sciences). Despite the significant increase in the number of tuition fee paying students, the field of economics is still the most popular. Meanwhile, the politically preferred areas could not get significantly bigger neither in absolute student numbers, nor in their proportion among the fields of studies. Thus, the conclusion was drawn that – in average – students live their own lives, they follow their own expectations. Their decisions are limited to whether they enter the Hungarian higher education system and if yes, when. As statistics showed, they just do not diverge their field of interest just because other fields are more subsidized, even if their preferred one is not, or to a much lesser extent. In the current paper, the focus is on the higher education institutions' (HEI) behaviour reflecting on the announced reforms. Did they support the reform targets, or did they follow their own enrolment policies just like their potential students do?

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<sup>1</sup> Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

<sup>2</sup> Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary



## 2. Methodology

The HEI's behavior was examined by means of statistical analysis. All data used is available at felvi.hu, the official Hungarian higher education portal.

Data of first place applications and admissions of all students were examined by fields of studies between 2012-2017 in total, irrespective of the chosen institution and level of education. First place application data is thought to be more relevant instead of all applications, since every applicant may appoint several programs even at different fields of studies with a priority ranking. First place application shows the applicant's main interest.

Data of all admitted students by fields of studies, also irrespective of the HEI and level of education, is also examined for the same 2012-2017 period.

Further, ten Hungarian universities' average minimum entering scores (MES) for BSc programs are examined between 2013-2017. These ten universities are the most significant HEIs at the respective fields of studies. In the applied average, scores both financing forms are incorporated. BSc MES's are analyzed as average, though individual institutions may have behaved differently. Regarding that from 2012 to 2013, new legal rules were introduced to the calculation of applicants entering scores, data before 2013 does not give a comparable basis for longer term examinations.

## 3. Research Results

To have an overall picture of Hungarian higher education reform outcomes as of the admittances by fields of study, Figure 1. shows an overall picture [1].

When further analyzing admittances, MES data of respective Hungarian universities between 2013-2017 unfolds a quaint phenomenon: both at the privileged and disfavoured fields of studies, the MESs increased during the examined period. Since there is a rather obvious negative correlation that the higher the EMS is, the less applicants are admitted, at certain fields of studies this seems contradictory to the governmental policy, while at other fields of studies it is seemingly just irrational.

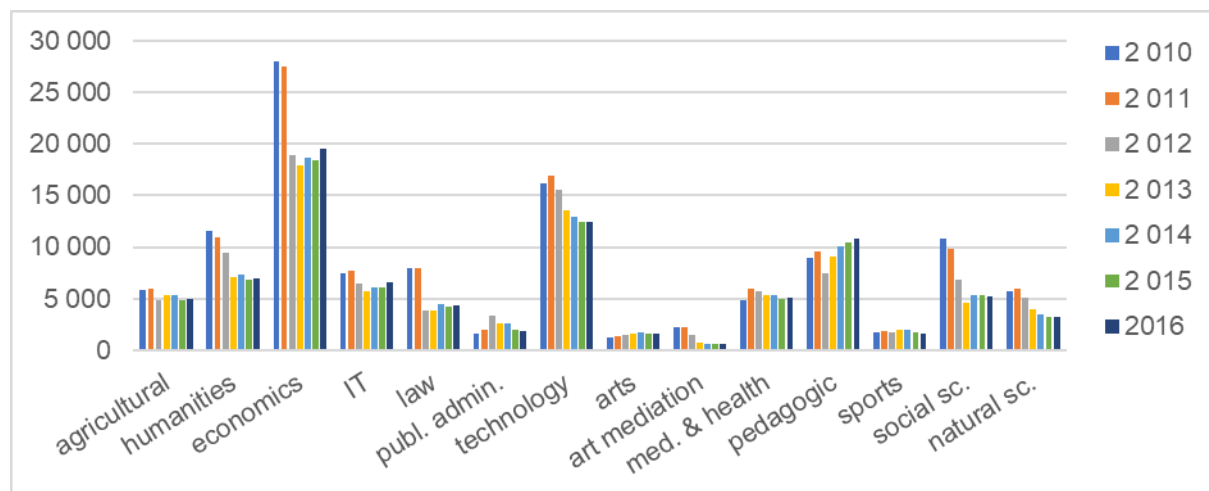


Fig. 1. – Number of admitted students according to fields of study, 2010-2016, [1]

### 3.1. Economics

As Figure 1. illustrates, economics is the biggest field of study, where a dramatic drop in student numbers occurred. From 2011 to 2012, the field lost more than 30% of its admitted students, though still could remain far the biggest field of study: a large number of students undertook fee-paying in order to study at programs belonging to this field.

After such a sudden dive in student numbers, one would expect that each and every interested student is intended to be caught by HEIs, especially if they undertake the fee-paying option. To regain students, which could be crucial at least from financial standpoint, one would expect that institutions decrease (or at least hold at level) their MES.

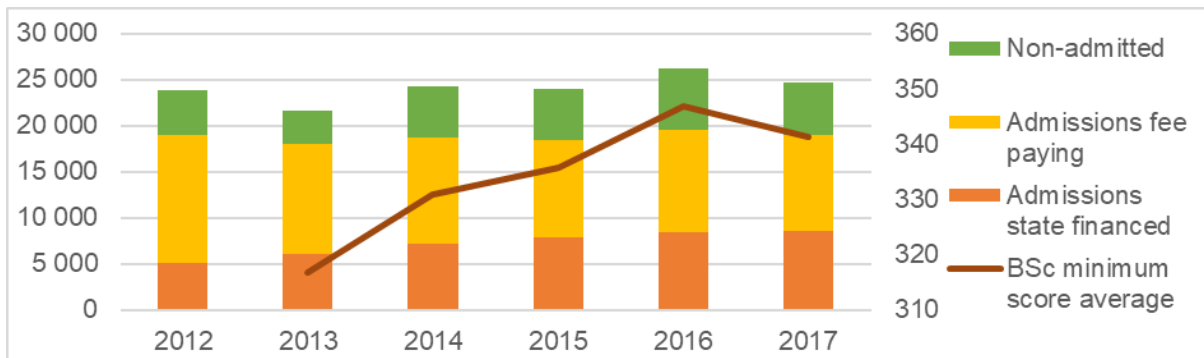


Fig. 2. – Field of Economics: Number of admitted students by financing status and non-admitted students, together with the average minimum entering BSc scores

Despite the expectations, Figure 2. shows that average MES was raised (especially in 2016, at the peak of the period), and it is also apparent that reserves remained in the system: a record number of applicants were refused to admit by the highest MESs in 2016.

### 3.2. Law

The field of law is relatively small comparing to the others, though also was affected by the reforms. From 2011 to 2012, it lost approximately 85% of its state financed places.

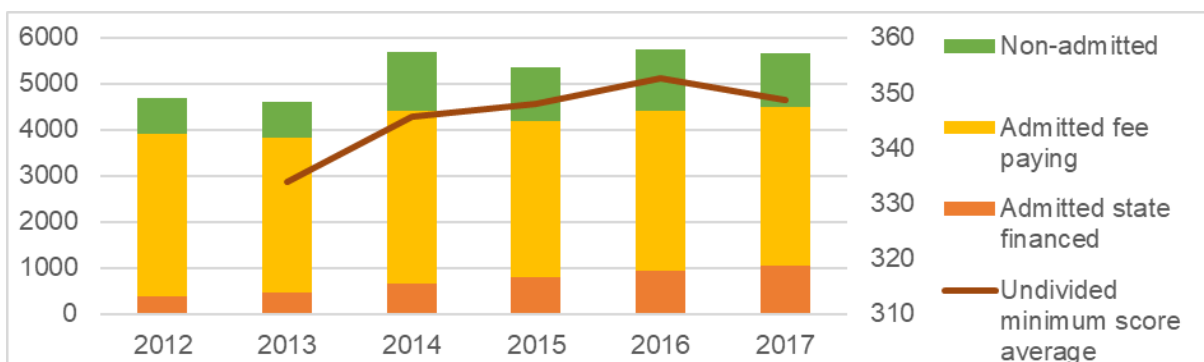


Fig. 3. – Field of Law: Number of admitted students by financing status and non-admitted students, together with the average minimum entering undivided programme scores

As an exception, in Figure 3. the average MESs are not given for BSc, but for the undivided (classical) law programs. The figure shows almost the same pattern as seen at the field of economics.

### 3.3. IT

If one turns to the politically favored fields, the patterns are not less surprising. Field of IT is not a traditionally big field (before the reform, it was even a little smaller than field of law), but it is intended to be increased.

Figure 4. depicts that finally an increase really happened at this field, while in 2016 the goal was still at least to regain lost students compared to 2011, to reach the original level. It is also visible that due to a constantly increasing interest, non-admitted students' number is also increasing parallel to the constantly rising BSc MESs. Therefore, it can be stated that the growth of this field could still be higher, the system has significant unutilized reserves due to the HEI enrolment policies followed in average.

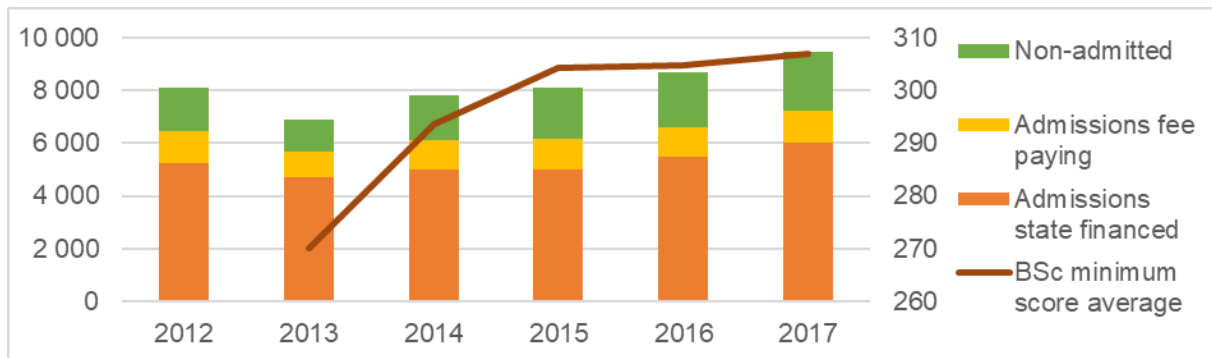


Fig. 4. – Field of IT: Number of admitted students by financing status and non-admitted students, together with the average minimum entering BSc programme scores

### 3.4. Technology

Field of technology also figures an unexpected pattern. Though it is also a preferred field of the reform and the second biggest of all fields, the pattern is surprising.

Despite all political/governmental support, on Figure 5. a constant decrease is visible in the number of admitted students by a constantly increasing average BSc MESs, also an uplifting number of rejected students.

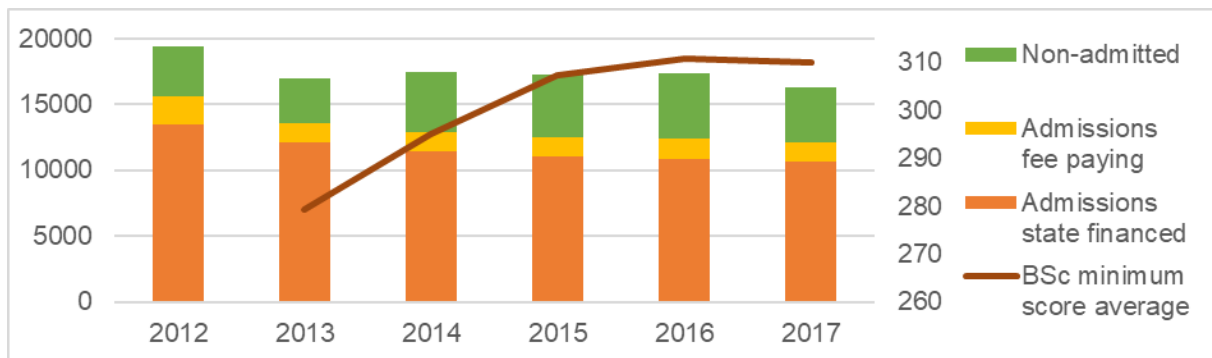


Fig. 5. – Field of Technology: Number of admitted students by financing status and non-admitted students, together with the average minimum entering BSc programme scores

Starting from 2013, the ratio of the rejected applicants to the admitted ones are constantly higher than the same rate at field of economics (Figure 6.).

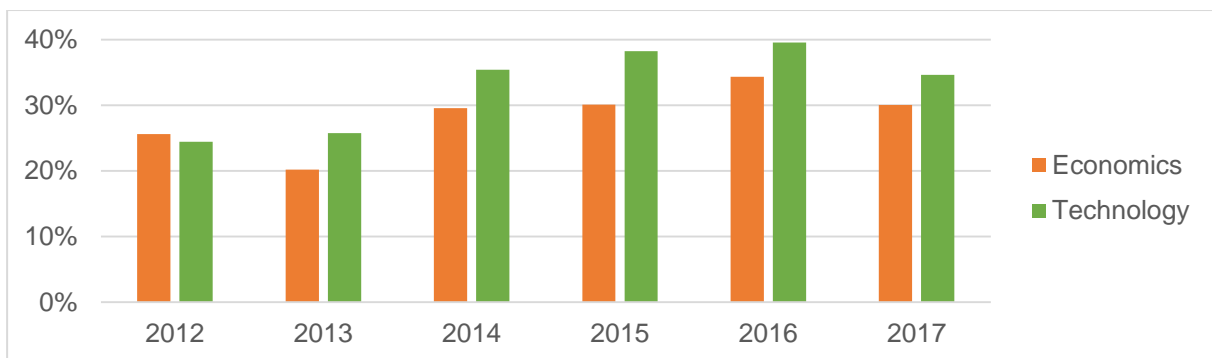


Fig. 6. – Ratio of non-admitted to admitted students at the fields of economics and technology

This pattern obviously does not represent a positive response to the political intentions to increase the field. It is visible that not only reserves are in the system, but it looks as if institutions would form their independent (and discrepant) strategy from the governmental goals.



#### 4. CONCLUSION

The scope of this paper is only to examine the effectiveness of measures executed mainly through financing means to HEIs enrolment policies – without any value judgement on the goals themselves.

In the referred earlier study [1], where students' reflection was examined, figures showed that in a short or medium term, such a policy can reach only a partial result: a significant decrease in student numbers, but not a change in their directions.

Analyzing the same question from HEI's point of view, the conclusion is very similar. HEIs' behavior by increasing MES seems irrational, if it is considered that more students with more financing is generally good. Though it should be pointed out that this seemingly irrational behavior of HEIs may truly be rational, and antagonism is not meant to be resistance to a 'higher good'. HEIs must keep in mind their own and their programs' reputation. However much it is desired politically to educate more students at a given field, any option that may jeopardize the HEI's and its programs' reputation (like decreasing MES and enrolling students with lower assumed quality) may not be balanced by the immediate financial advantages of admitting more students. It must also be added that this interpretation in itself does not give a proper explanation to raising the MESs instead of just holding them at a given level. (This would need further investigation.)

On the other hand, it was assumed that HEIs with programs on the less favourable end of the reform scale take the necessary measures with high probability to keep the admitted students' number as high as possible. Despite the expected, figures show that irrespective of the possible short term financial consequences, even HEIs with disadvantaged fields of studies also raised in average their MESs, thus tried to compete with higher supposed quality. This shows that if governmental goals and financing contradicts HEI's quality policies on how many students and with what entering results they can properly educate, this later seem to prevail at last at the examined time scale.

Consequently, a governmental policy can only be partially effective if it does not meet (or even contradicts to) the interests of its major stakeholders. In a case like this, a mass of individual and institutional independent decisions reflecting to it may bring – in the 'best' scenario from the point of view of the policy maker – only a partial fulfilment, which should be taken into consideration when setting such policy.

#### References

- [1] CSÓKE, R; TÓTH, Zs. "Governmental Theories–Students' Responses: Student Strategies Reacting to Changes in Hungarian Higher Education", Quality Innovation Prosperity, 2017, 21.3: 143.