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Moving Through and Moving Away: (Higher) Education Strategies of Hungarian Students

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Abstract

The existence of persistent and entrenched inequalities within the Hungarian education system is revealed in international comparison, thereby highlighting the strong link between students' socio-economic background and educational outcomes. University entry and progression are patterned on student background, with a lack of systematic and robust support for disadvantaged students. Drawing on two rounds of the Active Youth survey of full-time university students (in 2015 and in 2019), this paper explores the diverse educational and career strategies of young people. After giving an overview of tertiary participation in relation to socio-economic background, it explores the financial experiences of university students, pointing to the related difficulties and mitigation strategies. The paper also looks at future migration plans, including their aim, planned duration, and key push and pull factors. The results point to social closure, along with large differences in student experiences throughout university, with international student mobility remaining the privilege of more advantaged students. The lack of equitable student pathways into, through, and beyond Hungarian higher education correspond to several policy areas. One conclusion is that the financial support system needs to be made more effective through better targeting and the provision of sufficient funding for students in need.[1]

Keywords: *Hungary; Inequalities in higher education; International student mobility; Career strategies.*

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1. Introduction

The current generation of university students in Central Eastern Europe (CEE), including in Hungary, were born a decade after the transition from a planned economy to a market system. They were around nine to ten years old when the global economic crash of 2008 happened, potentially impacting them and their families to a serious extent (Medgyesi, 2019). Further, they grew up in a borderless Europe, given that Hungary joined the European Union (EU) in 2004 and the Schengen Area[2] in 2007. Owing to transnational cooperation, thousands of university students have become internationally mobile for a part or all of their degrees, primarily via the Erasmus program (EU, 2017; Neumann, 2019). For this generation of students, global connectedness is taken for granted, given that they are likely to have joined national (such as the now defunct iWIW) or international social media networks and have been able to enjoy a wide variety of online films, music, and news (Daily News Hungary, 2014).

Little has changed, however, in relation to the opportunities of this generation of young people growing up in Hungary. As successive rounds of international student assessments have shown, family background has a profound impact on educational outcomes (OECD, 2016; OECD, 2019), resulting in a persistent and large gap between students with the highest and the lowest economic, social, and cultural status. Similarly, university entry, progression, and outcomes are patterned on student background, with a lack of systematic and robust support for disadvantaged students (Fehérvári et al., 2016). Róbert (2019) suggests that patterns of inter-generational mobility show the strong impact of parental education on outcomes, and points at consistently low levels of mobility. Arguments for social mobility – in which more equitable access to higher and / or lifelong education plays a crucial role – range from the need for human flourishing to the realization of common social good. A 'broken social elevator' has serious social and political consequences, undermining social cohesion and reducing life satisfaction (OECD, 2018b). Further, arguments for social mobility are also rooted in economic factors, such as claimed in a recent World Economic Forum (2020: 11) report, suggesting that '[…] low levels of equality of opportunity may act as a magnifier of the negative impact of income inequalities on the rate of economic growth. Low social mobility entrenches those inequalities and acts as a drag on economic growth'.

This paper extends the literature on the diverse educational and career strategies of young Hungarian people from different socio-economic backgrounds, pointing to inequalities in university experience and international mobility. Drawing on two rounds of the Active Youth secondary dataset that surveyed full-time university students, it looks at the educational pathways through Hungarian universities in 2015 and in 2019. First, it sets out to give an overview of tertiary participation with regard to university level and type of study area along familial

[2] Those crossing the internal borders of this area within the European Union are not required to go through border checks.

background. Second, it explores the financial experiences of being a university student, pointing to the difficulties some face in budgeting for accommodation costs and general living expenses. This often results in the need to take on a substantial amount of part-time work, hindering studying. Finally, given the increase in the proportion of the country's population living in other EU Member States, the paper looks at the potential future migration strategies of students, including their aim, planned duration, and key push and pull factors.

Taken together, the results presented here point to social closure rather than decreasing inequalities, along with large differences in student experiences at university, and international student mobility remaining the privilege of more advantaged students. The educational inequalities explored in this paper indicate the need for urgent change in university financing and student support schemes to create a fairer and more equitable university system. Beyond the economic argument for a highly educated workforce that contributes more in tax, as well as broader societal benefits through better health and higher levels of democratic participation, the moral argument of fairness is a key component of the struggle for equity in university access, participation, and progression.

2. Literature review

The need for broader skillsets and capabilities that help individuals to adapt and relate to a computerized world (Bakhshi et al., 2017; OECD, 2018a), compounded with the issue of credential inflation (Collins, 1979), mean that school-related preferences are increasingly for a more generic education that facilitates potential university progression (Marginson, 2016). Obtaining a university diploma yields substantive personal advantages, such as a reduced risk of unemployment, the possibility of a substantive wage premium, and general improvements in mental and physical health (Lochner, 2011), whilst wider society is a net beneficiary too (Marginson, 2006; 2016). The Hungarian higher education system is similar to that of the Germanic countries, and currently operates through three different types of institutions. First, universities have degree-awarding powers at Bachelor, Masters and PhD levels; second, universities of applied sciences were transformed from former colleges following the Higher Education Act of 2011 and can now award BA and MA degrees; and third, colleges focus on delivering BA programs and short-cycle higher education qualifications (Eurydice, 2019; Kováts, 2016). Similarly to other CEE countries, in Hungary the rate of enrolment in tertiary education has grown substantially over the past decades to create a high-participation system (Marginson, 2016; Temesi, 2016). The expansion of higher education was initially seen at those institutions with a strong vocational focus, followed by institutions with a more academic focus (Bukodi and Róbert, 2008). Whereas in 2000 the proportion of 30–34 year olds who had completed tertiary education (ISCED level 5–8) was 14.8 per cent, this had grown to 26.1 per cent in 2010, and to 33.7 per cent by 2018, albeit having stagnated for the five years previous to this (Eurostat, 2019b), due to the low entry rates of those with matriculation exams, therefore eligible to attend (Nyüsti, 2018). This review looks

at the social dimensions of higher education, as well as financial and budgeting issues related to university experience, concluding with a discussion of post-graduate progression and international mobility of Hungarian students.

2.1 The social dimensions of higher education

The Bologna declaration of 1999 was designed to create comparable degrees in both the BA and MA degree cycles across the 48 countries that signed up to the related policy and practice changes coming under the aegis of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) umbrella. The process of the non-binding harmonization of the EHEA is seen by Corbett and Henkel (2013) as a political project, focused on instrumental aspects such as increasing competitiveness and employability, whilst also asserting the principles of academic freedom and autonomy, respecting diversity, and fostering trans-national cooperation. The social dimensions of higher education are linked to both the economic and the societal outcomes of education: 'widening access to quality higher education is viewed as a precondition for societal progress and economic development' (EHEA, 2019). These dimensions of higher education (HE) were elements of early meetings during the formation of the EHEA (Fehérvári et al., 2016) However, Usher (2015) argues that, beyond 'rhetorical nods', the EHEA has not been substantially developed due to potential policy changes related to equity that are the purview of nation states. Nonetheless, work on equity indicators and regular reporting has been ongoing (see, for example, European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015; 2018), despite differences in conceptualizing access-related factors and the resultant problem of comparability (Usher, 2015).

The key socio-economic characteristics observed as regards the social dimension of higher education are the impact of parental education on participation; the progression of students from an immigrant background; and gender equity. These aspects are generally compared using trans-national comparative surveys, such as the EuroStudent study (Orr and Mishra, 2015). A wider set of background characteristics includes parental occupation; disability; age; socio-economic background; and ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minority status (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015; 2018; Usher, 2015). Beyond comparing national higher education regimes on the basis of these characteristics, research has also explored some of the key reasons for the difference in admission rates and the variety of the policy environment. For instance, Orr et al (2019) looked at the diversity of admissions systems across Europe, showing how school systems with streaming are problematic from an equity perspective, and proposed that decision points that could lead to the abandonment of HE should be encountered as late as possible.

Recent work by Fehérvári and colleagues (2016) on the social dimensions of Hungarian HE first reviews the secondary data sources regarding inequalities, and second identifies the turning points in educational pathways. The authors analyze the issue from the viewpoint of the most vulnerable groups, such as the socio-economically disadvantaged, Roma, and disabled students, but they also reflect on

the circumstances of students who have young children, as well as those from the Hungarian minority communities in neighboring countries. The study evaluates four key areas of student life, including the length and the prolongation of university studies; postgraduate access – as the proportion of students entering MA programs –; international student mobility; and labor market outcomes (Fehérvári, et al. 2016). The work provides an in-depth analysis of the support afforded to students. For example, to increase access, students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, those with disabilities, and students with young children can receive extra points on their applications. Fehérvári and colleagues (2016) identify the latter provision in aiding retention as learning support for students with disabilities. Other sources of support include means-tested bursaries and non-means-tested scholarships for socio-economically disadvantaged students.

As suggested by Nyüsti (2012; 2018) as well as Fehérvári and colleagues (2016), socio-economically disadvantaged students are less likely to attend university, more likely to drop out if attending, and are more likely to prolong the normal period of study. Students from different socio-economic backgrounds attend different types of institutions and courses with different modes of study: disadvantaged students are over-represented in lower-prestige-, lower mobility courses that lead to clear professional outcomes predominantly at universities of applied sciences and colleges (Nyüsti, 2018; Fehérvári et al., 2016). According to EuroStudent data (2017), Hungarian students (27 per cent) are substantially more likely to be enrolled on part-time programs than students of other CEE countries (15 per cent). Further evidence that those enrolled in part-time Hungarian HE tend to be more disadvantaged is the fact that only 38 per cent had parents with a university degree, whilst this was true of 61 per cent of full-time students (EuroStudent, 2018).

2.2 Financing university: public and private funds

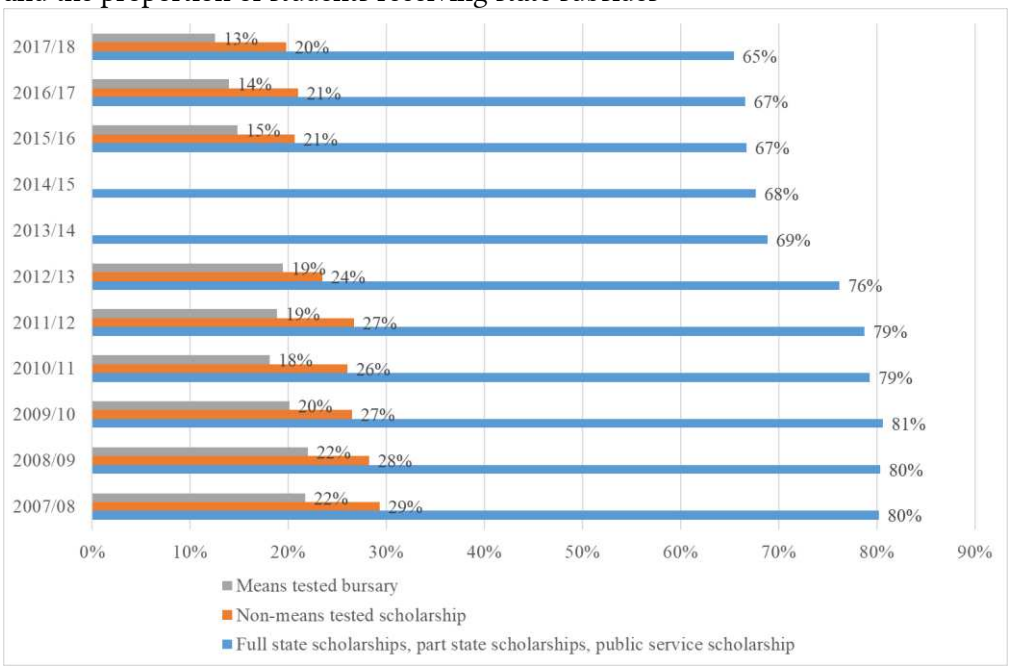
Appropriate financial support in the form of maintenance funding and financial aid for tuition are key elements of student success (Dougherty and Callender, 2017; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017). Systems without substantive financial support provision increase the risk of students having to rely on familial contributions, or to undertake part-time work throughout their studies (Antonucci, 2016; 2018; Hordósy; Clark, 2018), meaning that students from poorer backgrounds are left with the choice of indebting their future, or paying with their time throughout the duration of their studies.

Due to public sector cuts in Hungary in the post-transition era, higher education institutions started charging fees in 1996, and this issue subsequently became a politically charged topic. The initial tuition fee system was abolished by the incoming government in 1998, while an income-contingent student loan system was set up in 2001 to cover maintenance costs, as well as the tuition fees applicable to some programs (Barr and Crawford, 2000; Veres, 2016). Crucially, part-time, distance programs enrolling students in higher education tended to

retain tuition fees without means-testing, justifying this approach with the need to maintain 'quality' due to the nature of applications from prospective students with weaker lower secondary school achievement (Bukodi and Róbert, 2008). This is precisely the sector of higher education that attracts mature students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and as such, this 'dual track' phenomenon has hindered attempts to widen access (de Gayardon, 2019). More recently, the Higher Education Act of 2011 retained this regressive feature, and defines full state scholarships and partially state-funded university places on a yearly basis, allowing institutions to recruit students who pay full tuition fees in numbers above and beyond those of funded places (Eurydice, 2019). Tuition fees in Hungary are not means-tested, but tend to be paid by those whose achievements in lower secondary school are weaker and who are either attending university full-time, or via distance-learning and part-time provisions. Places that are associated with state scholarship involving free or partial tuition tend to go to students who achieve more academically at an early stage of schooling.

The national higher education statistics for the past decade show that the structure of participation is being transformed. The absolute number of students is decreasing, along with the proportion of students who are enrolled in state-financed, full-time programs, as well as the proportion of students whose studies are partly subsidized by the state, as shown in Figure 1 (Oktatási Hivatal, 2017). Between 2008 and 2018 the decline in places on state-financed, full-time programs was 15 per cent. Beyond demographic changes, such as the decrease in the number of students passing matriculation exams, Polónyi (2018) also points to the substantial reduction in state-funded places, along with the increase in the minimum exam-requirement thresholds for popular humanities and social sciences courses.

Figure 1: Proportion of full-time students participating in state-financed programs and the proportion of students receiving state subsides



Source: Hungarian Educational Authority (Oktatási Hivatal, 2017)

Exacerbating the issues around affordability is the fact that financial support in Hungarian HE is not well targeted; the two forms of support are academic scholarships, which are dependent on term-based student outcomes (and rankings within courses), and the means-tested bursaries that students need to apply for each term (Fehérvári et al., 2016). Means-tested forms of financial support are administered by institutions themselves, hence there is a lack of transparency and consistency across the board. Bursaries can vary substantially based on the year of entry, tuition status, nature of residence, and even in relation to the university or faculty the student attends, and are only available to full-time entrants to HE (Nyüsti, 2018; Fehérvári et al., 2016).

As a result, the private funds required for studying in the Hungarian higher education system are the third highest in the European Union (European Commission, 2018). University attendance, including tuition fees and especially maintenance payments, represents a significant drain on family budgets, with more than 90 per cent of students receiving financial support from their parents in 2016 (Nyüsti, 2018). The proportion of students in receipt of familial support is broadly similar, varying between 85 and 94 per cent across the CEE countries according to EuroStudent data (2017), but substantially less for the Nordic countries (varying between 60 and 77 per cent). Those students who are least able to rely on their families typically take out substantial maintenance loans (52,000–

55,000 HUF on average per month, ~€168–177[3]), while one-third of them also work part-time (81,000–94,000 HUF average earnings per month, ~€262–304) throughout the duration of their studies (EuroStudent, 2017).

Hámori and colleagues (2018) looked at the main motivation to work amongst university students. The authors found that the propensity for part-time work does not differ in relation to student background in terms of intensity or the amount of money that is earned; however, there are key differences in the degree to which students can tailor their engagement outside of university to their area of studies and potential future careers. Students who take on part-time work due to financial need are significantly less likely to work in areas connected to their studies than those who opt to work despite already having sufficient funds. Importantly, Hámori et al. (2018) also found that students who take on part-time work due to financial need are less likely to aspire to further studies. Conversely, those who do not work part-time, or those who take on part-time roles in their area of studies, are significantly more likely to plan to continue with postgraduate studies. This suggests that financial hardship and the urgency associated with obtaining a part-time job has a long-term impact on graduate progression that does not seem to be mitigated by the provision of financial support.

2.3 Progression and outcomes

Beyond the crucial issue of who gets to go to university, the issues of retention, completion, and study success, as well as post-graduation progression, are of high importance (Vossensteyn et al., 2015; Antonucci, 2016; Fehérvári et al., 2016; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014). After comparing the situation in different European countries, Quinn (2013) suggested that the students most likely to drop out are those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, men, ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, and those enrolled in part-time programs, with the worst retention rates measured in Italy, Hungary, and Poland. Reasons for non-continuation are of course interrelated (Yorke, 2000; Tinto, 2002; Kurantowicz and Nizinska, 2013; Crawford et al., 2017), and are identified by Quinn (2013) as a combination of the following:

1) **Socio-cultural factors:** when there exists the expectation and self-fulfilling prophecy on the part of families, local communities, and university staff that non-traditional students will not complete their studies.
2) **Structural factors:** when the unequal positioning of students in society due to poverty, class, race, or gender increase pressure, making it difficult for them to persist.
3) **Policy factors:** when strategic decisions about HE negatively impact the ability of students to complete their studies.

[3] The Central Bank of Hungary (Magyar Nemzeti Bank) exchange rate on 2 January, 2017 (to correspond with the reporting year of EuroStudent): €1 = HUF 309,40

4) **Institutional Factors:** when institutional cultures and practices do not support students to succeed.
5) **Personal Factors:** when illness, mental health issues, traumatic experiences, or the influence of family, peers, or cultural-, work- or religious commitments lead students to withdraw.
6) **Learning Factors:** when student approaches to learning and/or poor quality higher education prevent students from completing their studies (Quinn, 2013: 71).

Level of education became strongly associated with employment prospects in Hungary in the period following the transition years of the 1990s, both with regard to the employment rate and the wage premium. Those with a tertiary education saw their earnings rise from 57 per cent more than the average pay of primary educated citizens in 1989 to 92 per cent more by 2002, and the former have remained similarly high since then (Fábian et al., 2014). According to the latest report from the OECD (2019), compared to the income earned by those who have only a secondary education (defined as 100 per cent) the relative income advantage of having a bachelor's degree is more than 150 per cent, whereas in the case of a master's degree the advantage is as much as 200 per cent. However, the labor market entry of different groups remains unequal (Eurostat, 2019c). Using graduate career tracking data, Fehérvári and colleagues (2016) showed that graduates with parents who have only finished primary school are likely to take longer finding employment after graduation, and are liable to earn substantially less once employed compared to those whose parents have finished at least secondary education. Similarly, using European Social Survey data, Róbert (2019) found that the impact of parental education on the likelihood of completing tertiary education is strong in Southern European countries, as well as in those countries with a German-type school system, such as Hungary. Further, Róbert (2019: 135) concludes that 'In Hungary, there was no substantial change[4] in terms of either the correlation between the education of the parent and the child or the educational premium; but upward mobility declined strongly and the effect of parental education on the completion of tertiary education increased after the economic crisis to a greater extent than in any of the other societies investigated'.

As Veroszta (2016b) shows using graduate tracking data, economics and business degrees provide stable, well paid jobs, whereas those in the arts and humanities as well as sciences are associated with less stable contracts and smaller initial pay packages. As the 'Hungarian university system is not as stratified as the American or British' (Tóth and Szelényi, 2019: 114), differentiation based on socio-economic background is more likely to take place via course choice, retention, and international mobility (Quinn, 2013; Veroszta, 2016b; Nyüsti, 2018).

A focus on international student mobility has characterized the past few decades of the European integration process. However, participation in terms of diploma mobility (mobility for the whole duration of a degree program), and shorter, credit-based mobility programs such as Erasmus are not afforded to all

[4] Looking at the impact of the economic crisis, Róbert compared data for 2002–2008 and 2010–2014.

(Neumann, 2019; Nyüsti, 2018). Differences in the take-up of credit mobility based on socio-economic background are due to costs that can be prohibitive despite the availability of scholarships; these include a lack of sufficient language skills and of institutional infrastructure for supporting mobility (Nyüsti, 2018). EuroStudent data VI (2017) suggest that two-thirds of Hungarian university students do not plan to take part in credit mobility initiatives, predominantly due to the additional financial burden their semester or year abroad would mean. They also show that around 13 per cent of students took part in study-related credit mobility opportunities. This proportion is similarly low in most other CEE countries, although the Baltic States and Slovenia reported above-average credit mobility (EuroStudent, 2017). Students who study at university focusing on academic subjects are four times as likely as those at universities of applied sciences to study abroad (Veroszta, 2016b). Nyüsti (2018) goes on to suggest that international student mobility has become a new frontier of social inequality, given that both differences in aspirations and take-up of initiatives are based on socio-economic background. The difference in take-up has a knock-on effect on individuals' next career steps – as shown by Veroszta (2016b) using graduate tracking data from 2015, those who have studied abroad enjoy a substantial wage premium in relation to those who have not. As a study by Horváth and Jakab (2018) highlights, those students who are the least mobile internationally due to their lack of language knowledge are also those with the least advantageous social and financial background. Similarly, it is only a small proportion of the most advantaged students who can opt to study for their first degree outside of Hungary (Neumann, 2019; Golovics, 2018). Drawing on focus group interviews with Hungarian students who have studied at higher ranked institutions in the UK, Neumann (2019) points to the importance of familial funds for pre-application preparation programs, as well as maintenance and tuition fee support and the need for wider information networks, concluding that the threshold for diploma mobility is very high.

Researching mobility apart from for the purpose of studying is considerably harder due to the diverse potential definitions and lack of robust and comparable datasets. A recent micro-census estimated that 306,000 Hungarians live abroad (KSH, 2016), a figure that does not include those who have no family members remaining in the country. The highest estimates suggest that as many as 637,000 Hungarian citizens could be living and working abroad, constituting 6–7 per cent of the population (Gödri, 2018). After years of a low level of migration, especially of the low-qualified and very young, Hungary has 'caught up' in this respect with other countries that joined the European Union since 2004. In 2017, outward migration[5] from Hungary to another EU Member State was measured at 5.2 per cent relative to the total population based on Labour Force Survey data (Hárs, 2019; Eurostat, 2019a). Suggesting the phenomenon of brain drain, Hárs (2019: 142) observed that 'Hungary is the only country [amongst those joining the EU since 2004] where the graduate migration rate is highest – higher than the average rate

[5] 'Outward migration is measured as the proportion of the population of an EU-10 country living in another EU Member State relative to the total population (those living abroad plus those who have stayed in the home country)' (Hárs, 2019: 139).

and above the rate seen in any of the less-qualified groups'. Most studies, such as one by Kováts and Papp (2016) based on a non-representative survey, and one by Blaskó and Gödri (2014) who used national statistics, suggest that internationally mobile Hungarians tend to be younger, and more likely to have either a diploma or a vocational qualification. The main motive for mobility is a combination of the search for a better life away from what is perceived as the bad economic and political situation in Hungary, and the desire for opportunities for professional growth, with substantial variation observed in the destination of migrants.

3. Research questions and methods

Active Youth 2019 is the fourth wave of a representative student survey that was conducted by the Hungarian Active Youth Research Group. It measures the political and voluntary activities of young adults enrolled in higher education at regular intervals, allowing for the analysis of educational trajectories into universities, and respondents' attitudes about their next steps (Szabó, 2019). This paper utilizes the two recent iterations (2015 and 2019) of this survey as secondary evidence to raise questions about the higher education strategies of current Hungarian university students. Based on the Active Youth data, it explores the following research questions:

1) What patterns can we observe in terms of who participates and progresses within Hungarian higher education?
2) What are students' financial experiences of attending university with regard to:
a. financial difficulties;
b. accommodation costs; and,
c. part-time work commitments?
3) What strategies of international mobility can be observed across different student groups with regard to:
a. the intention to migrate, and the main purpose of international mobility; and,
b. push and pull factors of international mobility?

The quota-based sample of the Active Youth survey included 800 full-time university students who were attending a Hungarian university or college at the time of the research. The respondents were selected according to the restricted random walk method. Questioning involved a unique technique, whereby students were addressed by their peers during face-to-face interviews. The 100 interviewers were students themselves from the faculties of political science, sociology, and the social sciences. This technique was designed to diminish the classical differences (age, social status, attitudes, etc.) between interviewee and interviewer, and to increase the validity and authenticity of answers. The sample included 35 institutions and was representative of the higher education population in terms of the composition of institutional faculty; gender of students; level of studies (university-college, BA, MA, integrated MA program, and PhD). The margin of error for the 800-person sample is ± 3.5 percentage points (with a 95 per cent

confidence interval; however, the margin of error may be even higher (Szabó, 2019).

Issues with using secondary data are associated with the aim of data collection and its coverage, the definitions that are used in the dataset, data quality, sampling frame, and response rates (Smith, 2002). In the case of the Active Youth datasets, two key issues emerge; first, the dataset only covered full-time students who were actively enrolled, thus not allowing for the analysis of the experiences of students on part-time distance education programs or those who had dropped out. Second, it only allowed for a partial analysis of the social dimensions of HE, given that it did not include characteristics such as ethnicity or disability. Nonetheless, the data permit an exploration of the broader university experiences and future plans of current Hungarian students.

Beyond the Active Youth 2019 and 2015 surveys, our discussion also draws on data from the EuroStudent VI. Survey (EuroStudent, 2017). This international project focuses on the social and economic dimensions of European higher education. The cited Hungarian data collection process was conducted in 2016, and the representative sample included 25 universities and colleges, with 7202 students answering the online questionnaire (EuroStudent, 2017; 2018; Hámori et al., 2018). Utilizing this database via the EuroStudent (2017) website (http://database.eurostudent.eu) allows for comparisons to be made with other CEE countries, using results from Albania, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

The results section discusses, first, the main characteristics of, and differences within the sample regarding the social dimensions of participation and progression. Second, it provides an overview of the financial issues related to studying at university, focusing on subjective economic status and part-time work. Third, it looks at the migration potential in the sample, analyzing the reasons for planned migration, its purpose, as well as push and pull factors across different student groups.

4. Results

4.1 Participation and progression – moving through higher education

The majority of the members of the quota-based sample of Active Youth were studying for their BA/BSc degrees (71 per cent), with 15.5 per cent enrolled on integrated MA programs, 10.3 per cent studying for an MA/MSc, and 3.3 per cent enrolled on a PhD program. Male respondents were more likely to be studying applied areas, such as engineering, computer sciences, medicine, sports, and jurisprudential disciplines (53.6 per cent men compared to 39.2 per cent women in applied sciences), whereas women were much more likely to be studying the

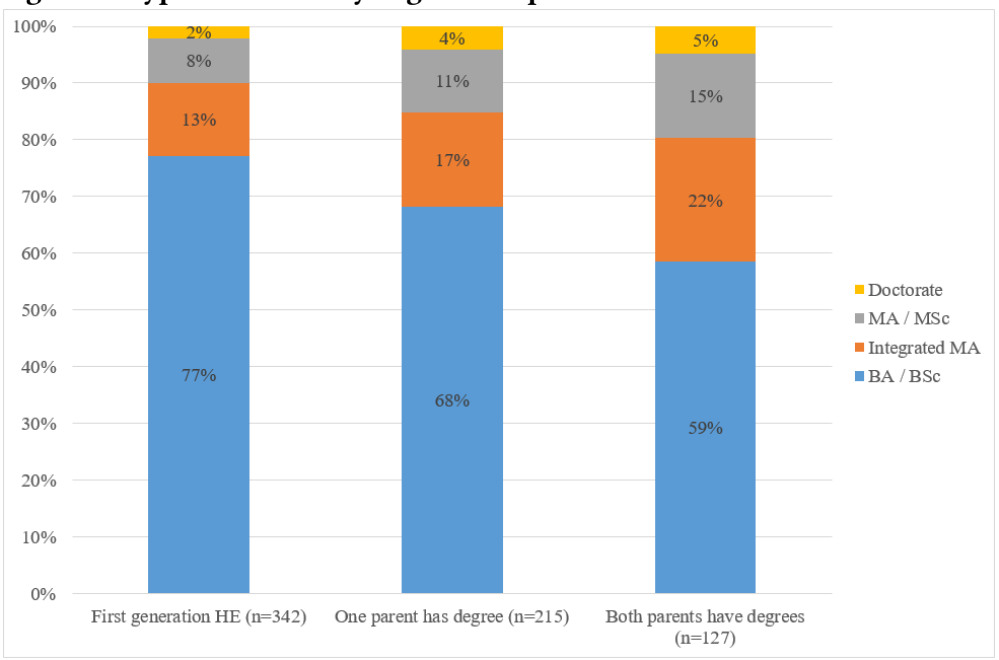
humanities[6] (17.6 per cent women compared to 9.4 per cent men in humanities). Regarding the age distribution of the sample, 40.3 per cent of the respondents were 21 or below; 44.3 per cent between 22 and 24 years old; and 15.4 per cent were 25 years old or more. Drawing on the EuroStudent data (2017), which covers a wider subset of students, it is notable that a smaller proportion of Hungarian BA students are included in the youngest age group than in other CEE countries, while Hungarian BA students aged 25 years and above are found in the highest proportions (30.2 per cent).

The Active Youth survey offers information about parents' highest level of education. Results from 2019 show that 44.8 per cent of respondents are reproducing the educational status of their fathers (i.e. 44.8 per cent of all students' fathers have a university degree). The rest of the students were pursuing a higher level of education than their fathers had achieved. The children of fathers who had completed only a maximum of eight grades of primary school are considerably underrepresented in the Hungarian higher education system, their proportion in this sample being only two per cent. Based on the EuroStudent data (2017), compared to other CEE countries, Hungarian students were somewhat more likely to have a university-educated father (40 per cent).

Drawing on the Active Youth data, we also found a marked difference in terms of students' progression to higher degrees in relation to parental education, similarly to the work of Nyüsti (2018) and Fehérvári et al (2016). Our data clearly shows that the 'leaky pipeline' phenomenon applies to those students who were the first in their family to attend university: they constituted 44 per cent of Bachelor's students, 36 per cent of integrated MA students, 30 per cent of MA / MSc students, and only a fifth of all PhD students. Figure 2 shows the educational advantage of students whose parents have completed higher education; given they are more likely to be studying at levels beyond a BA/BSc, this mirrors the educational aspirations of young people as measured at the age of 12-13 (Lak et al., 2018).

[6] The disciplinary areas have been categorised as follows. *Applied sciences*: agronomics, computer science, jurisprudential, public administration, engineering and technology, military, national security and law enforcement, medicine, teacher training and sports science. *Humanities*: humanities, theology, and art. *Social sciences*: economics, and social sciences. *Sciences*: health sciences (non-medical); natural sciences.

Figure 2: Type of university degree and parents' education



Source: Active Youth 2019 database

4.2 Money issues: financing university

The Active Youth survey asked respondents to subjectively self-assess their economic status. Those who struggle financially tend to be older students who are less likely to receive substantial financial support from their families. First-generation students are more likely to say that they are struggling to make ends meet than those with parents who have been to university, with 14.8 per cent of all first-generation students suggesting that they struggle to get by, or just about manage financially. Respondents whose father has only a primary school qualification are four-and-a-half times more likely to say they are struggling to make ends meet than those students with a university-educated father.

Regarding the subjective economic status of students, the EuroStudent (2017) outcomes suggest that Hungarian students are less likely to say they have serious financial difficulties (22 per cent) than other CEE respondents. Comparison of the recent Active Youth data with that of 2015 indicates that there was no substantial change between the two time points of data collection with regard to the student make up in higher education. In 2015, 20 per cent of students reported that they were struggling to get by financially. The same response was chosen only by 12 per cent of respondents during the second period of data collection, in 2019. This raises the question whether the general living standard of Hungarian society changed in these five years, or whether a stagnating, increasingly closed higher education system has favored students who are in a better economic situation. A further feature of the structure of the sample strongly supports the

latter hypothesis – that we are indeed likely to be observing rising inequalities. Between 2015 and 2019, the proportion of students from villages, which are considered to be a disadvantaged settlement type, declined by seven per cent, while a new category appeared: two per cent of the sample chose 'abroad' as their permanent residence (see also Kiss, 2008).

Accommodation – whether permanent or term-time – matters in relation to how students perceive their financial situation. Students whose permanent address is located in a smaller rural settlement or smaller town were somewhat more likely to suggest that they struggle financially. The key issue, however, was their term-time living circumstances. Students who were renting privately or living in student accommodation were more likely to struggle financially; conversely, those who were living in their own flats/houses tended to say they were managing without any financial concerns. Given spiraling rental costs, especially between 2013 and 2020 in Budapest, but also in major university towns across Hungary, it is no surprise that a fifth of those who were renting had serious difficulties paying for their privately rented flats (MTI, 2018; Ingatlan Net, 2020). Looking at accommodation costs comparatively using EuroStudent data (2017) shows that 83.3 per cent of students who were not living with their parents were burdened by this expenditure, given that they were spending more than two-fifths of their income on it. Across other CEE countries, the proportion ranged from 65.5 per cent for Poland to 91.3 per cent for Latvia; generally higher than in Western Europe.

Some students are not able to draw on family funds or reserves to mitigate financial pressure, and have to rely on part-time work either regularly or occasionally throughout their studies. Data from the Active Youth survey shows that students who were studying humanities and science subjects were more likely to say they were struggling to make ends meet than those completing social sciences degrees or applied subjects. However, social science students were most likely to be working occasionally or regularly, suggesting that their paid jobs were contributing to their budgets. There is a clear cohort effect in relation to financial struggles and the resultant need to take on paid work: parents are less capable of contributing to student budgets during the later years of university studies. Whereas only a third of the youngest respondents (19–20 year olds) said they worked occasionally or regularly, the proportion was more than half for those due to graduate from a BA (aged 21–22 years old), and two-thirds for those aged 23 and above. Indeed, those taking longer degrees, and those working towards their doctorates were most likely to say they were struggling to make ends meet, hence were working both irregularly and regularly.

Although it is possible that the jobs students were engaged in would be useful in relation to their career progression, it is rather striking that only a third of MA, and 1 in 6 PhD students were not engaged in paid work. PhD students were a lot more likely to be working regularly than students at other levels of higher education. As for BA/BSc students and those on integrated MA programs, a fifth of them were working regularly, whereas another third worked occasionally. Drawing on the EuroStudent data (2017), compared to students of other countries Hungarian BA/BSc students were more likely to have taken on term-time paid

work than their CEE counterparts, both regularly (37.7 per cent) and occasionally (14.8 per cent). More than two-thirds of MA students had taken on regular and occasional work in most CEE countries, with the exception of Albania, Croatia, and Serbia. As for Hungary, 55.5 per cent were working regularly, and 13.9 per cent working occasionally throughout their MA courses. In relation to the student budgets of CEE students, both BA (9.2 per cent) and MA (7.8 per cent) students obtained a somewhat greater proportion of their total monthly income from national public student support schemes. However, this clearly left a large gap, given that both Hungarian BA (40.3 per cent) and MA (55.2 per cent) students generated a substantial proportion of their monthly budget through self-earned income, more than students in other CEE countries (EuroStudent, 2017).

EuroStudent data (2017) also allows for the analysis of the link between the students' field of study and their employment. Of those who had taken regular or occasional paid jobs throughout their studies, 47 per cent of Hungarian BA and 64.4 per cent of MA students reported that their employment was closely or very closely related to their field of study; these figures are some of the highest compared to those of other CEE countries. However, the figures are also higher for those who had financial difficulties, as well as those who were working more than 20 hours per week – meaning that while the jobs of the former might support labor market integration, the students' focus was clearly not on university studies for financial reasons.

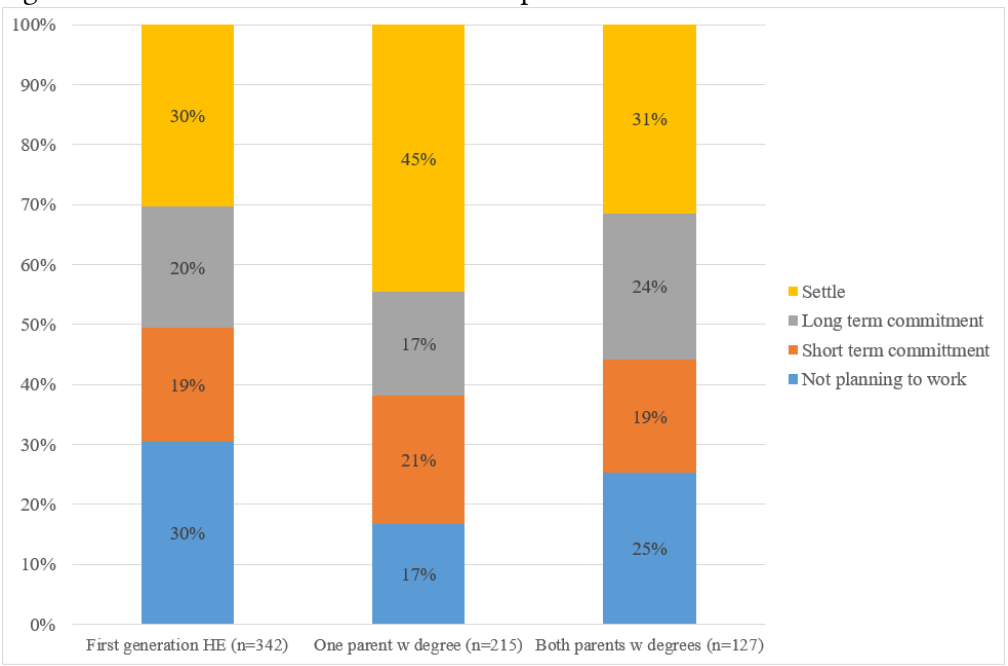
4.3 International (student) mobility – moving away

The Active Youth survey allows for the analysis of planned international mobility (Szabó, 2015; 2019). Given that research participants were university students in Hungarian institutions, this section looks at migration *potential*, i.e. planned relocation with the purpose of short or long-term work, settling, or studying abroad (Sik and Szeitl, 2016). The 2015 round of data collection put more emphasis on labor market expectations, including experiences and aspirations regarding working or studying abroad. Compared with the data from 2019, the proportion of students planning to study or work abroad for the long and short term had not changed significantly; however, the intention to permanently live abroad had decreased by five per cent.

Overall, one-fifth of the Active Youth sample (20.6 per cent) reported that they were not planning to move abroad at all.[7] Drawing on a composite measure, Figure 3 shows that first-generation HE students were the least likely to be planning to work or settle abroad, with 30 per cent saying they were not planning to do so, compared to 17 per cent of those who had one parent with a degree. In fact, it is this latter group who appeared to be the most keen to settle abroad, with 45 per cent planning to do so, along with another 17 per cent thinking about committing to working abroad for a few years.

[7] The proportion of data missing for the migration-related questions amounted to 13.9 per cent.

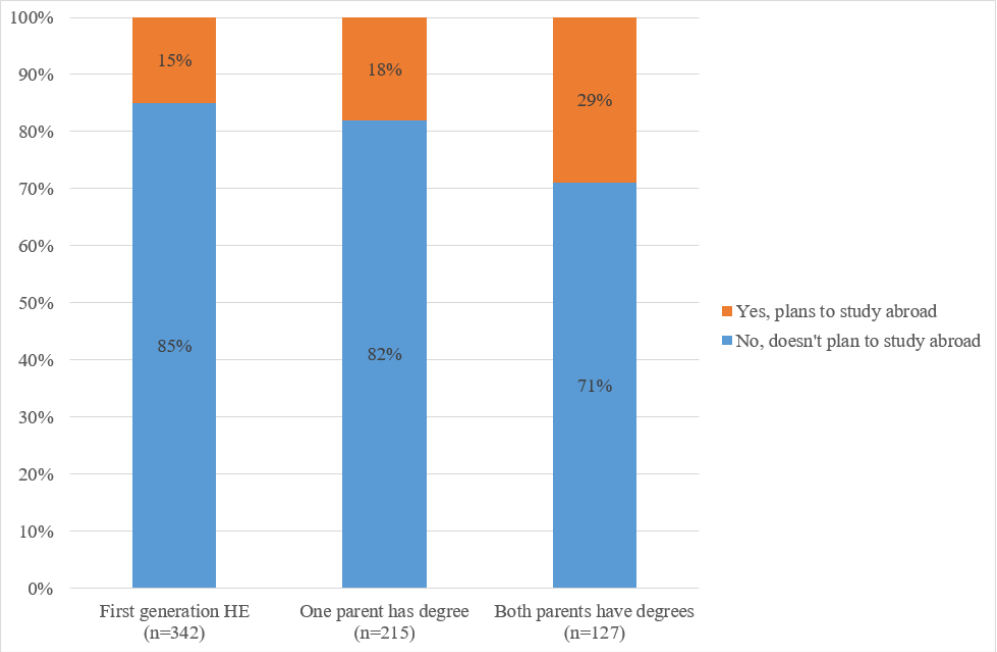
Figure 3: Plans to work abroad and level of parents' education



Source: Active Youth 2019 database

Regarding diploma mobility plans specifically, 19.9 per cent of respondents said they would consider studying abroad, and most of them would opt to work for the short or long term, or settle outside of Hungary, whereas 55.3 per cent were thinking of migrating only for short or long-term work, or settling, but not leaving for the purposes of diploma mobility. Students whose parents were more highly educated were more likely to want to leave Hungary for a shorter period of time in general, and to study for a degree abroad in particular. Conversely, students who were the first in their family to attend university were significantly less likely to plan to study abroad. Whereas only 15 per cent of students whose parents had not been to university were planning to study abroad, 18 per cent of those with one parent who was university educated and 29 per cent with both were planning to do so, as Figure 3 shows. Regarding settlement type, students from Budapest were more than twice as likely to say they would like to study abroad as those who lived in smaller villages (see also Szabó, 2019).

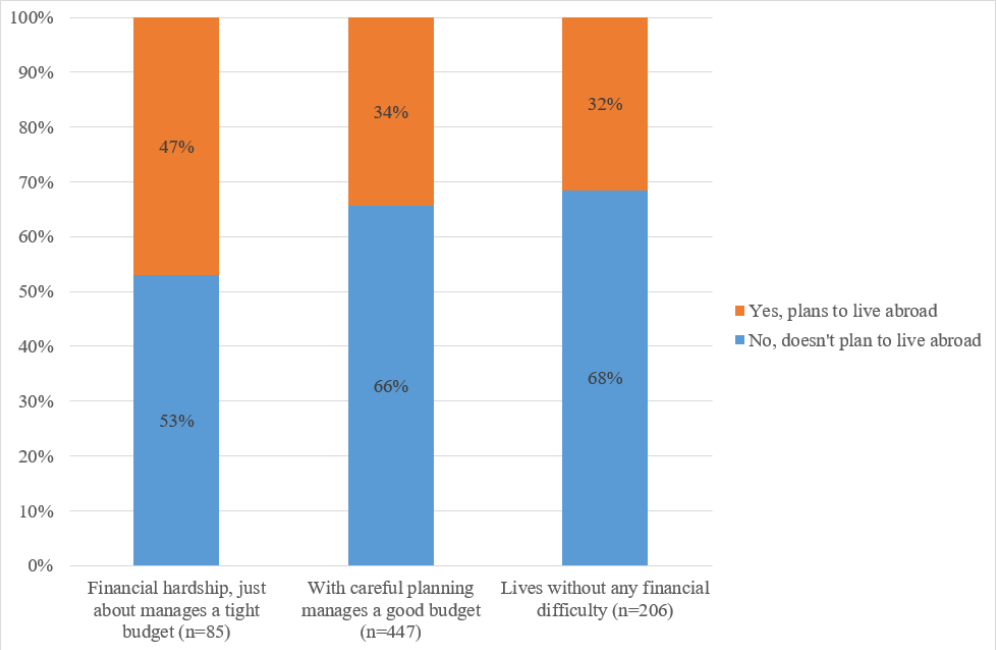
Figure 4: Plans to study abroad and level of parents' education



Source: Active Youth 2019 database

Students who claimed to be struggling financially were less likely to be planning to study abroad (tuition fees and maintenance costs are likely to be prohibitive) than those who suggested they were living without financial difficulties. Interestingly, however, those with financial problems were more likely to say they were planning to move abroad in either the medium or long term for work than those who were living without financial concerns, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Plans to live abroad and subjective economic status



Source: Active Youth 2019 database

Overall, although students were less likely to want to migrate in 2019 than they were in 2015, the trend in the least advantaged students' intentions had reversed by 2019. Whereas in 2015 members of this group were less likely to want to move abroad, by 2019 they were more likely to want to leave the country for good. In 2015, 55 per cent of all respondents wanted to work abroad for a few years and there was no significant difference according to subjective financial status. In 2019, 47 per cent preferred this option amongst those with no financial problems, and 61 per cent of those who were facing financial difficulties. Similar patterns emerged when looking at whether students were planning to settle abroad: those who were struggling financially were more likely to be planning to move away for good (47 per cent) than those who were living without financial issues (32 per cent). The data shows that the conclusion of the Active Youth research from 2015 is even more true in 2019: 'the motivation for migration is above all financial: it is easier to make a living abroad, the standard of living is higher abroad, and much more money can be set aside' (Szabó, 2019: 34).

Further detailing the motivation to move abroad, career opportunities (17.9 per cent) and better remuneration (22.6 per cent) were the primary factors, along with a desire to gain experience (14.8 per cent) and learn languages (12.5 per cent). Based on a factor analysis, the three push and pull factors of international migration can be summarized as: 1) 'opportunities' – meaning career and remuneration opportunities, gaining experience, and meeting new challenges, as well as studying and language learning; 2) 'contextual push factors' – such as the

state of Hungarian politics and the lack of work-related opportunities; and 3) 'personal push factors' – such as family-related reasons and a poor financial situation. Regarding the steps students were taking to prepare to move abroad, respondents were most likely to report learning a foreign language (27.1 per cent), and gathering information about job opportunities (9.6 per cent), universities (7.1 per cent) and scholarships (6.0 per cent). Only a handful of students were actively taking steps already, such as applying to universities or jobs. Students who were not planning to live, work, or study abroad mainly explained this as due to their commitment to their homeland (22.4 per cent), or families and friends (35.4 per cent), and the fact that they could get by fine in Hungary (16.5 per cent).

Language competences were of course one of the strongest indicators of plans to study and work abroad, just as they were in 2015 (Szabó, 2019). In the recent Active Youth dataset, the level of English knowledge (the most popular foreign language taught in schools) was also correlated to the level of parental education. Students whose fathers were university educated were more likely to speak English at an intermediate (43.7 per cent) or higher (43.7 per cent) than those whose fathers had not completed higher education (52.6 or 25.6 per cent, respectively).

5. Discussion

The pervasive and entrenched socio-economic differences in Hungary can be charted in the form of unequal school pathways, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds being hindered in their choices at most stages (Bukodi and Róbert, 2008). Key factors for students regarding university access are whether they are enrolled in full-time, government-subsidized, or part-time fee-paying programs, and the nature of the university degree – either academic or vocational. When enrolled in tertiary studies, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are: a) more likely to attend colleges or universities of applied sciences and take more vocationally focused and less prestigious courses that tend to yield lower financial returns upon graduation; b) less likely to progress to further studies and more likely to drop out of higher education altogether; and c) are less likely to participate in international credit- or diploma mobility (Fehérvári et al., 2016; Golovics, 2018; Veroszta, 2016a; Róbert, 2019).

Throughout this paper we have discussed some of the key issues relating to how broader inequalities shape the higher education pathways of young people in Hungary, reiterating the importance of parental background with regard to university experience – a key issue that Róbert (2019) observed to play an increased role in student trajectories since the financial crisis. The Active Youth data shows that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to report that they struggle financially, partly because the financial support system cannot compensate for gaps in student budgets (Fehérvári et al., 2016; European Commission, 2018). To make up for such gaps, those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to take on part-time work in general, as claimed in this paper, and to be engaged in paid work for more than 20 hours per week in

particular (EuroStudent, 2018). Further, members of this student group are less likely to persist in HE, are more likely to prolong their degrees, and are subsequently less likely to progress to postgraduate programs (Hámori et al., 2018; Fehérvári et al., 2016). The research this paper is based on has also provided strong support for the existence of a 'leaky pipeline' – inasmuch as those students who are the first in the family to attend university are decreasingly represented from the BA to PhD level, similar to the findings of Nyüsti (2018) and Fehérvári et al (2016).

Socio-economic inequalities related to second-language acquisition and budgetary constraints also affect students' plans for international mobility. Whereas students in the Active Youth survey from more advantaged backgrounds were more likely to say they were planning to pursue their studies abroad, students from less privileged backgrounds could not commit to such endeavors (Veroszta, 2016b; Nyüsti, 2018). However, this latter group was more likely to plan to work in a different country for a longer period, suggesting that one answer to social closure is indeed exit from the society they grew up in. Similar trends can be observed when looking at the type of settlements students are from: students from Budapest were more than twice as likely to say they would like to study at university abroad than those who were living in smaller villages (see also Szabó, 2019). This finding underpins Neumann's (2019) assertion that diploma mobility is reserved for metropolitan intellectual and upper-middle-class families.

Analysis of the main push and pull factors for international migration suggests that the latter is seen by the most advantaged students as more of a short-term, career-enhancing exercise, done to gain experience and learn languages. Using their economic advantages to obtain varied experience abroad, these students are likely to subsequently use their social networks to find jobs in Hungary. Students with less economic capital are more likely to plan on leaving the country to earn a living. They are, of course, less likely to be able to draw on their social networks to find a job in Hungary, hence they tend to make plans to spend a longer time abroad.

Reflecting on the call to create more equitable societies to increase social cohesion and economic prosperity, the need to build a more socially inclusive higher education system is crucial (EHEA, 2019; World Economic Forum; OECD, 2018b; Eurofund, 2017). The lack of equitable student pathways into, through, and beyond Hungarian higher education is related to a whole host of policy areas. The financial support system needs to be made more predictable, as well as more effective and better targeted, providing sufficient funding to full-time *and* part-time students in need. Similarly, supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds to obtain work experience in their chosen study area, and / or study abroad would be essential for at least starting to level the playing field. However, addressing wider issues such as early streaming within the school system, the decrease in both funded and non-funded university places, as well as the existence of a regressive dual-track tuition fee system – as would be required to create a more equitable higher education system – requires serious political and financial commitment.

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