



Revealing the Reasons Leading to Students' Drop-Out at the College of Dunaújváros

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Abstract: *In the strategy 'Europe 2020', EU claimed the aims to increase the ratio of graduates among 30-34-year old people, which means the expansion of the number of students in higher education as well as the decrease of dropouts. This double purpose is considered to be a big challenge both for countries and for higher educational institutes. It could be stated that parallel with the increase of higher education enrolment, supporting students who have already been admitted to higher education must be emphasized so that they could absolve their subject and take their degree.*

Keywords: students, higher education, drop-out from the education

Although higher education drop-out could be detected in all countries, its rate is different. In Hungary, the risk of drop-out is an up-to-date problem, typical to the whole higher education, which may have various approaches: e.g. pedagogical, social, or that of educational policy. This topic, regardless its weight and significance, has not received enough attention in the past years higher education policy (Molnár, 2011),

In 2013, the College of Dunaújváros put students' success in the centre, which meant that initiations aiming at the decrease of students' drop-out were basically based on the comparison of quantitative data and risk factors, and focused mainly on teachers.

In 2014, the College launched the project of Supporting Students' Success (SSS; in Hungarian: *Hallgatói Sikerességet Támogató Projekt = HASIT – compare HASIT..., 2014; Tehetséggondozás..., 2014*), the purpose of which was to decrease students' drop-out. The result of the introduced measures was that students' drop-out has decreased by 15 per cent in engineering, IT and scientific study programs.

The main mission if the College is to educate students who will be capable of making their way in life and will be successful at the labour

market. The further aim is that student should be well-prepared and meet the requirements bravely. However, that kind of approach to higher education needs a new point of view and starts a new institutional system.

During the SSS project, several reasons leading to drop-out have been identified in various sub-programs and the management with the staff started to handle the problem. One step of this process was a survey, carried out in May and June 2014, among all the students who should finish their academic studies with a thesis and the final state exam in the spring semester 2013-2014 according to their standard curriculum.

Research

The purpose of the research is to reveal all the reasons leading to students' drop-out and students' falling behind, such as not finishing the studies on time, not getting college leaving certificate according to standard curriculum, delaying or even not writing the thesis.

The hypothesis of the research: The primary reason for students' drop-out is considered to be the academic overrun (i.e. progress in studies not according to standard curriculum) as well as writing the thesis and its circumstances. The secondary reasons are thought to be the background factors: family and work place problems. The mentor system of the College as well as its program for bridging the gap can reduce or eliminate these problems.

The research was carried out from the middle of May to the end of June 2014 by a self-administered online questionnaire. The online questionnaire was sent through the student information system of the College of Dunaújváros, called Neptun, to all students who should write their thesis in the second term of 2013-14 academic year, regardless the fact whether they absolved the course or not, i.e. whether they wrote and handed in their thesis or not.

Basic data

The number of the population, i.e. the number of students the questionnaire was sent to is 497. The number of the sample is 171, which means that 34.4 per cent of the population filled in the questionnaire.

Since the aim of the researchers was to work out the information from all questionnaires, the sample was not weighted according to study programs. This is supported by the main features of the research: this is regarded a survey formulating the problem and clearing up the situation. A survey like that considering its aim and topic has not yet been carried out at the College of Dunaújváros. Based on the results of present research, further investigations are planned to do emphasizing the differences between study programs and the level of academic studies (bachelor or master).

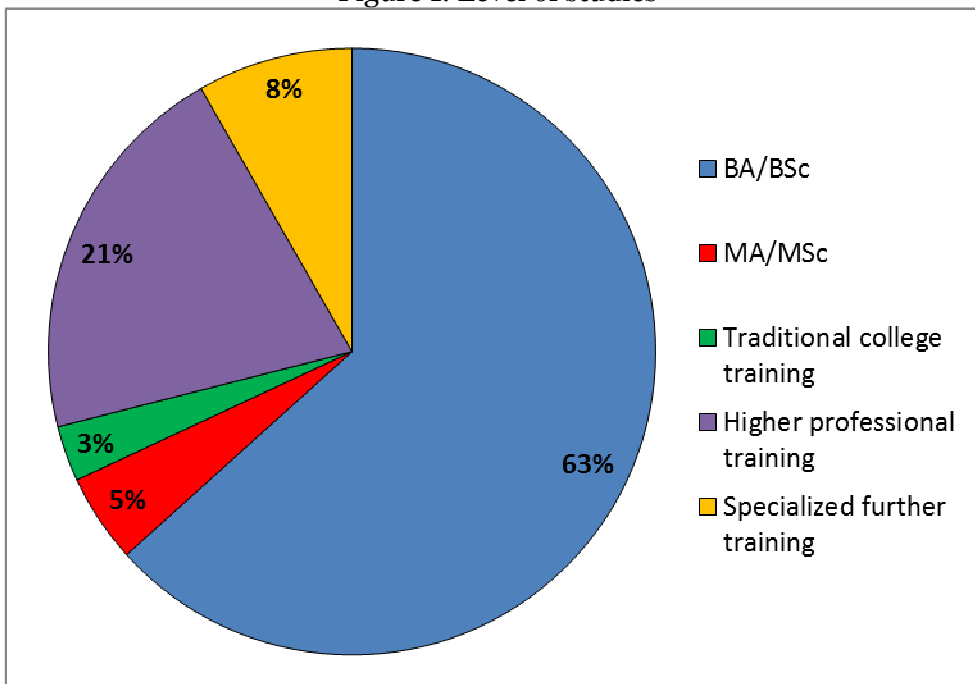
The distribution of the sample subjects according to their study programs is the following:

Table 1. Distribution of students according to their study program

Study program	Number	Percent
Tax Management Administrator	1	1%
General IT System Manager	5	3%
Andragogy	23	13%
Materials Engineering	2	1%
Bank Administrator	1	1%
Business Administration and Management	7	4%
Business Information Technology	12	7%
Mechanical Engineering	17	10%
Engineering Assistant Specialised in Rubber Engineering Technology	4	2%
Engineer Specialised in Rubber Engineering Technology	3	2%
Office Manager	2	1%
Engineering Specialized in Industrial Environment	2	1%
Communication – Culture Organizer	1	1%
Communication and Media Science	10	6%
Logistic Technical Assistant	9	5%
Mechatronic Engineering Assistant	1	1%
Preparatory Course for the Measuring – Evaluation Tasks and Pedagogical Special Exam	4	2%
Engineering Information Technology	24	14%
Engineer Teacher (Mechanical Engineering) MA	3	2%
Engineer Teacher (Computer Engineering) MA	3	2%
Specialisation in Quality Control	1	1%
Engineering Specialized in Quality Control	5	3%
Technical Management	13	8%
Vocational Technical Instruction	2	1%
Teacher of Educational Assessment and Measurement	3	2%
Financial Administrator	7	4%
Accounting Administrator	1	1%
Assistant Television Producer	1	1%
Electrical Engineering Assistant	3	2%
Web Developer	1	1%

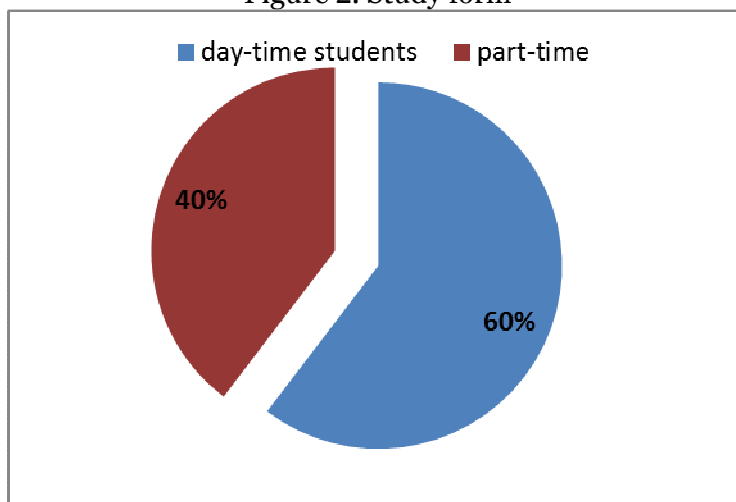
According to the level of education, nearly two third of the students filling in the questionnaire study on BA/BSc courses (63%), around one fifth of the subjects on Higher professional training (in Hungarian FSZ, FOSZK), a greater number of the subjects go to Specialization further trainings, while the subjects studying at MA/MSc or traditional college training form a small proportion of the sample.

Figure 1. Level of studies



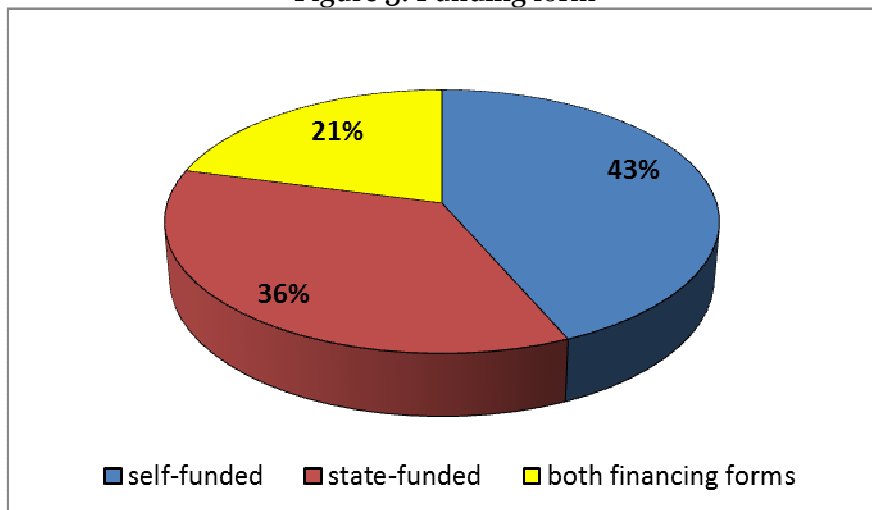
According to study form, more than half of the subjects study as a day-time student, while approximately 40 per cent is correspondent or part-time students.

Figure 2. Study form



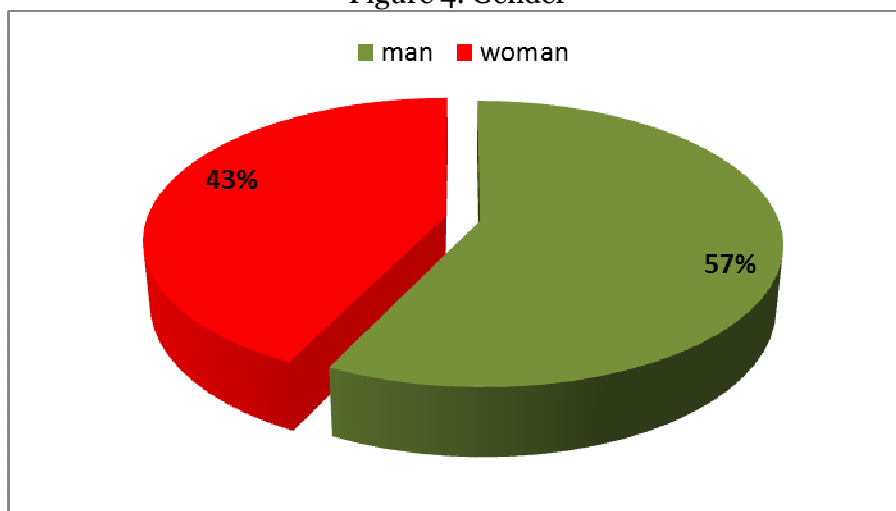
According to funding form, the biggest proportion of the subject (43%) are self-funded so they have to pay tuition fee, a bit more than one third's (36%) studies are financed by the state, while one fifth of the students (21%) have been studying in both forms of financing at different periods.

Figure 3. Funding form



As far as the subjects' gender is concerned, the greater proportion (57%) was male while 43 per cent of the sample was female.

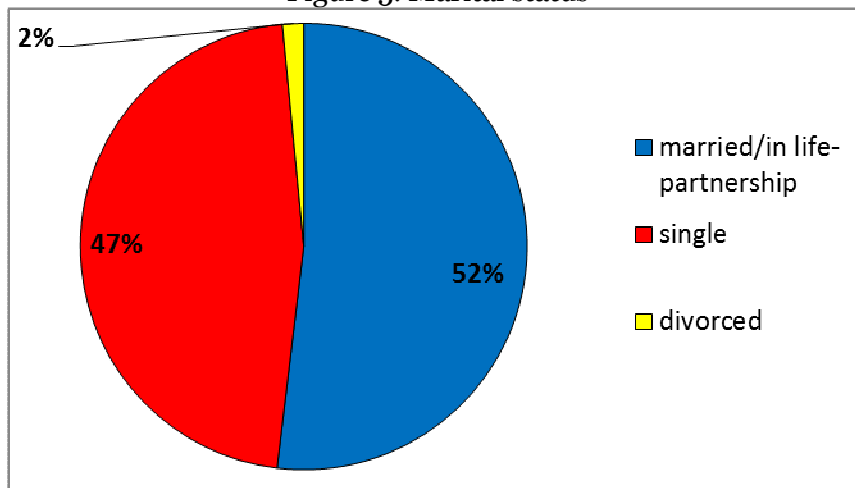
Figure 4. Gender



According to their age, the subjects are in between 20 and 54 years: nearly one third of them are 20-25 years old, while only small proportion of the sample is over 40. The average age (mean) is exactly 30 years, and modus is 24 years.

Taking into account subjects' marital status, more than half of them (52%) live in marriage or cohabitation, while nearly half of them (47%) are single; only very few subjects are divorced. The distribution of subjects according to their marital status can be explained by the fact that there are significantly lots of correspondent students are in the sample. There is a significant but not too strong correlation between the study form and marital status: $r=0.374$; $p=0.000$. A significant difference can be found between day-time and part-time students regarding their marital status: $\chi^2=19.779$; $p<0.001$. Over twice more part-time students are married or live in life-partnership than day-time students.

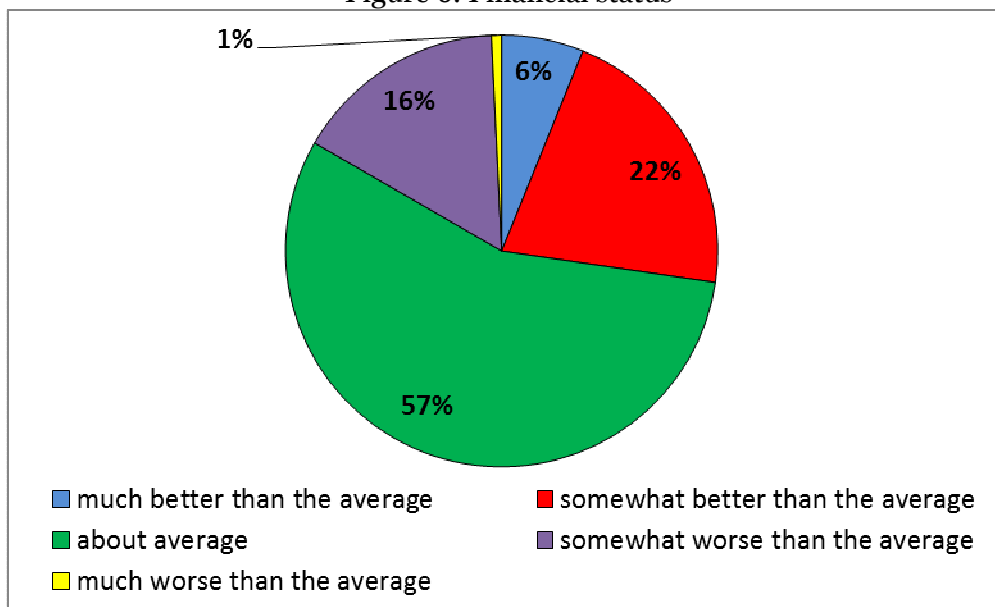
Figure 5. Marital status



In connection with the students' age and marital status, it is not surprising that one fourth of the subjects have children, and out of this one fourth every fifth subject has a child under 18.

Regarding basic information, subjects' financial status was asked. According to the students' answer, more than half of them (57%) consider their financial state average, 17 per cent think they live under, while 28 per cent over the average. Summarizing the data, based on their consideration, the students of the College of Dunaújváros regard their financial status a bit better than the average.

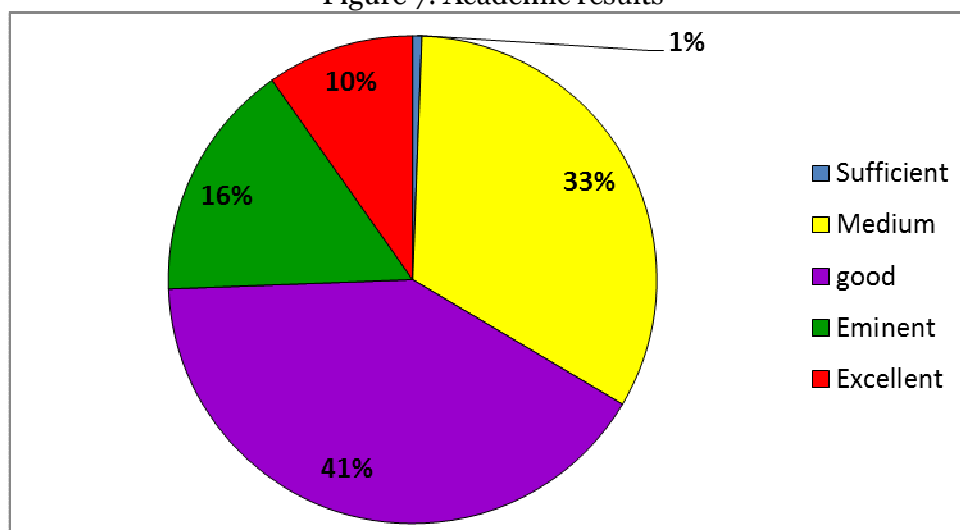
Figure 6. Financial status



Information on studies

The following group of questions regarded students' studies, which are absolutely significant in researching drop-out and thesis writing. First the subjects' academic results are accounted and their opinions on it regarding the average results in a particular study program. Approximately one third of the students think their academic results are medium or worse, while one fourth of them claimed they are eminent or excellent.

Figure 7. Academic results



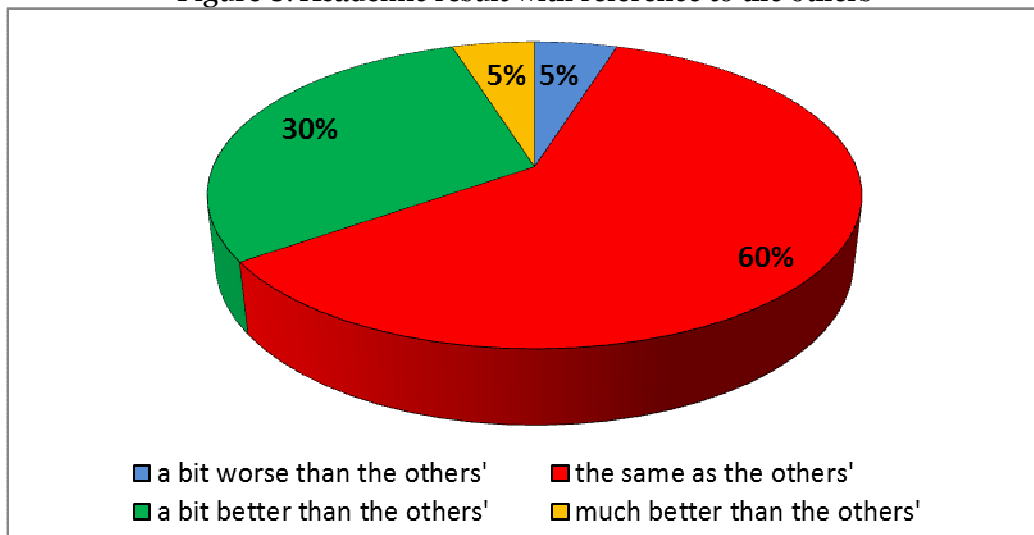
It should have been examined whether there is a connection between students' academic results and the variables regarding the level of education, study form and funding form. As far as the groups of day-time and part-time students are concerned, day-time students have worse academic result than the part-time ones ($r=0.167$; $p=0.032$) – which is an unexpected result of the survey. On the other hand, there is a significant difference among the groups of students based on the level of education as well as on the funding form. State-funded students have better results ($r=0.180$; $p=0.021$), they probably want to maintain their scholarship and work harder not to pay tuition fee. The ones who study for their second degree (MA/MSc and Specialized further training students) have much better results than the ones who want to achieve their first degree or certificate ($\chi^2=29.908$; $p=0.018$).

Table 2. Academic result with reference to the level of studies

	Sufficient	Medium	Good	Eminent	Excellent
BA/BSc	1%	37%	47%	11%	5%
MA/MSc	0%	0%	29%	29%	43%
Traditional college training	0%	40%	20%	20%	20%
Higher professional training	0%	35%	32%	26%	6%
Specialized further training	0%	14%	36%	21%	29%

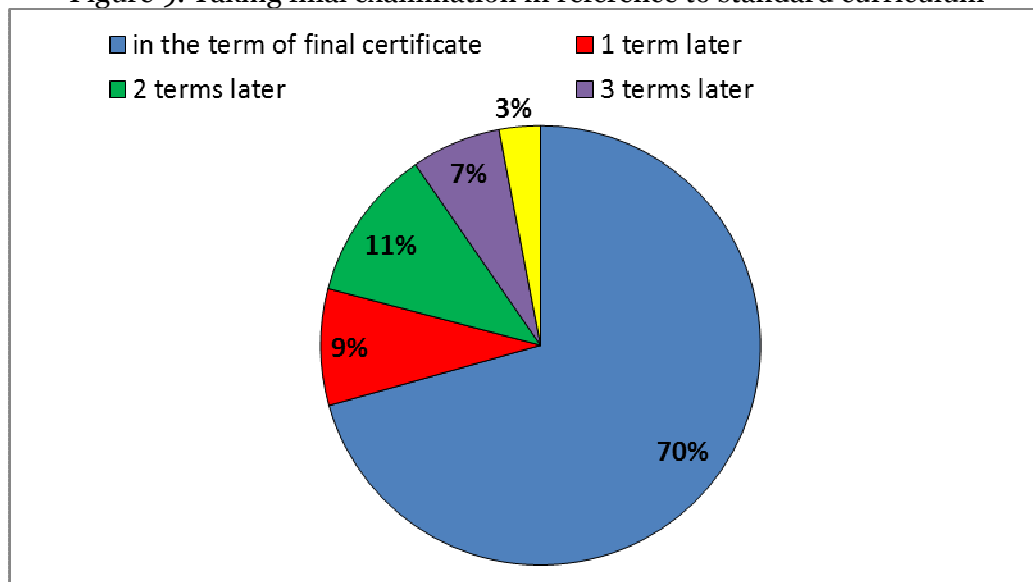
Comparing their own academic results with their group mates' one, 60 per cent of the subjects consider their own results approximately the same, while a significant one third thinks that their academic results are better or much better than that of the others.

Figure 8. Academic result with reference to the others'



As far as the date of the final state examination is concerned, more than two third of the subjects (70%) take their final exam in the term of getting the college leaving certificate, while the rest 30 per cent take it later: 20 per cent within one, 10 per cent within two academic years. However, it is important to state that these data are not facts, but students' plans as later final exams can only be predicted but not justified in advance.

Figure 9. Taking final examination in reference to standard curriculum



We wanted to find the reasons for the fact that approximately one third of students postpone their final exam, so we were searching for connection between variables. There is a significant correlation between academic results and postponing the final exam: the students who have worse than

the average academic results tend to take final state exam later than they get the leaving certificate ($r_s=-0.239$; $p=0.003$). There is a significant difference between variables: study form, level of education and postponing the final exam. As far as study form is concerned, day-time students are more likely to postpone their final exam than correspondent students ($\chi^2=12.963$; $p=0.011$). Based on the funding form, the state-funded students tend to take the final exam in the term of college leaving certificate ($\chi^2=16.245$; $p=0.039$).

Table 3. Study form and taking final exam

	in the term of final certificate	1 term later	2 terms later	3 terms later	4 terms later
day-time	61%	5%	21%	8%	5%
part-time	76%	11%	4%	5%	3%

Table 4. Funding form and taking final exam

	in the term of final certificate	1 term later	2 terms later	3 terms later	4 terms later
self-funded	78%	5%	8%	5%	5%
state-funded	65%	11%	16%	2%	5%
both financing forms	61%	12%	9%	18%	0%

It is thought to be worth examining the factors students regard as causes of postponing the final state examination. Among the pre-given factors, most students claimed that they cannot take their final exam in time due to unsuccessful course exams during their studies and not finishing their thesis.

Table 5. Factors leading to postponing final exam

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
They did not pass one or more course exams.	18	41%
The thesis is not finished.	16	36%
They did not meet seminar requirements.	10	23%
They cannot prepare for the theses of the final exam.	9	20%

The students who could not take one or two course exams tend to have worse academic results than the others ($r=-0.393$; $p=0.008$); and they are more likely to pay tuition fee ($r=0.392$; $p=0.009$). However, students not finishing their thesis are not typically the ones who could not perform their seminar courses successfully ($r=-0.402$; $p=0.007$).

It is obvious that the factors that lead to postponing final examination should be examined. Several reasons were given in the questionnaire and students were asked to scale all the factors from 1 to 5, based on the importance (1 means that the factor does not regard the date of final exam

at all and 5 means that it regards the date to the greatest extent). Concerning means, the two most significant retarding factors are work and family problems; they have high deviation, though. Moreover, wrong time management considerably contributes to postponing final exam. As far as the other reasons are concerned (mean: 1.68), students mentioned problems with courses, unsuitable thesis topics or high requirement both at workplace and at the college.

Table 6. Reasons behind postponing final examination

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Deviation</i>
work problems	2,27	1.484
family problems	2,09	1.571
wrong time management	1.98	1.303
lack of information	1.77	1.309
others	1.68	1.427
bad attitude	1.66	1.180
health problems	1,39	1.104
consultant's attitude	1.39	0.993
few lessons for thesis	1,25	0.576
not good thesis topic	1,14	0.668

Some significant correlations can be found between variables. Older students often mentioned workload, so there is a positive correlation between work problems and age ($r=0.425$; $p=0.007$). Their own bad attitude and laziness was given as a reason for postponing the final examination by self-funded students ($r=0.382$; $p=0.011$) and by the ones who did not pass one or more course exams ($r=0.402$; $p=0.007$).

The ones who indicated the lack of information, they find there are not enough lessons supporting thesis writing ($r=0.324$; $p=0.032$). There were some students who claimed that their consultant's attitude was not satisfactory. A lot of them mentioned they had chosen not a suitable research topic for their theses ($r=0.620$; $p=0.000$) and they received not enough information about the thesis and the final exam ($r=0.397$; $p=0.008$). Regarding family or health problems and wrong time management, they have no significant correlation with other variables.

Information regarding final examination

Since nearly one third of the students cannot take the final examination in the term of getting the college leaving certificate, the subjects were asked to offer solutions, possible modifications to the management of the College and to the working group of organizing and developing education so that the management and the lecturers could be able support students to take the final exam successfully without postponing it. Students were given several factors and were asked to evaluate them according to their importance.

The most significant factors offered by the student were to start writing the thesis in the last but one semester, to provide them with more and very exact information as well as to have more central consultation lessons about thesis writing. Parallel with this, they asked to have fewer and more

easily performable subjects in the last semester – when they need a lot of time to work on their thesis. As far as the other points of view are concerned, students mentioned factors worth consideration, such as indicated preparation for subject theses of the final exam, compulsory thesis pre-defending or pre-exam concerning literature and the theoretical part of the thesis. As far as the latter two offers are concerned, they have already been introduced by some institutes of the College. As a consequence of this measure, the quality of theses and defending the thesis at the final exam is higher at these institutes than at others.

Table 7. Recommendations for improving thesis

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Deviation</i>
starting the thesis in the last but one term	2.61	1.633
more and punctual information	2.56	1.591
fewer subjects in the last term	2.46	1.601
more central consultation regarding the thesis	2.36	1.426
easier subjects in the last term	2,11	1.472
more compulsory consultations with the consultant	1.89	1.305
more strict consultant's control	1.87	1.320
other offers	1.33	1.009

Taking into account the variables, there are several significant correlations between them. The students who would need more central consultations supporting thesis writing want to receive more and exact information ($r=0.593$; $p=0.000$), have more consultations with their own consultant lecturer ($r=0.513$; $p=0.000$) and require more strict consultant's control ($r=0.352$; $p=0.000$). Parallel with this, they asked for more easily performable subjects in the last semester ($r=0.404$; $p=0.000$), and they are the students who indicated that there should be more lessons supporting thesis writing ($r=0.505$; $p=0.001$).

The ones who would need more consultations with the consultant asked for more central consultations ($r=0.513$; $p=0.000$) and more information about thesis writing ($r=0.368$; $p=0.000$). They also indicated to start writing their thesis in the last but one term ($r=0.372$; $p=0.000$) to have enough time to work it out properly and expressed their opinion that a more strict consultant would contribute to finish the thesis successfully on time ($r=0.551$; $p=0.000$). They complained about having few lessons supporting thesis writing ($r=0.462$; $p=0.000$), and mentioned that due to their wrong time management they could not take their final exam on time ($r=0.336$; $p=0.029$).

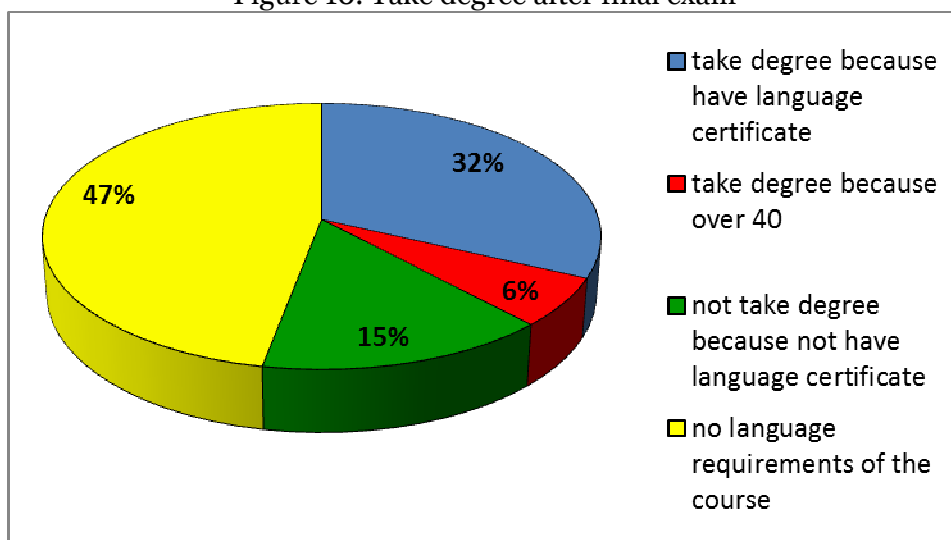
The student who offered to have fewer subjects in the last semester, want to have subjects that could be performed more easily ($r=0.560$; $p=0.000$). These are the students who take their final exam later than receiving leaving certificate ($r=-0.220$; $p=0.008$), and they admitted that their bad and lazy attitude greatly contributed to the fact that they could not take the final exam ($r=0.305$; $p=0.049$).

The students who would need more information want to have more central and personal consultations with their own consultant and more strict control by them ($r=0.338$; $p=0.000$). They were the ones who complained about not receiving enough information ($r=0.448$; $p=0.003$) and due to this they had to postpone their final examination.

The ones who recommended more strict consultant's control gave the reasons for not taking the final exam in time that they lack information ($r=0.302$; $p=0.05$) and there were only few lessons regarding thesis writing ($r=0.450$; $p=0.003$).

As far as taking the degree is concerned, only one important question is going to be analyzed (however, the survey examined this topic in details), which regards whether students can take their degree after the successful final exam or not. Part of the study programs, higher professional training, have no language requirements; nearly 40 per cent of the students can take the degree because they either have a language certificate or they are over 40 years old, which acquits them of language examination. 15 per cent of students cannot take the degree, having taken the final examination, though, because they do not have a language certificate, which is the prerequisite of taking over the degree. The ones who usually take over the degree after the final exam are likely to have better academic results ($r=-0.194$; $p=0.021$).

Figure 10. Take degree after final exam



Work experience

In the last group of question it was examined whether students have had work experience, this experience has or not a connection with their studies, when they have had that experience, and what advantages and disadvantages they have gained from their work experience.

Work experience which was gained before students' studies indicates big difference on the basis of the fact whether it had a connection with the studies or not. While 72 per cent of the subjects had work experience before their studies, only 48 per cent stated that their experience had a connection with their study program.

Figure 11. Work experience before studies (regarding study program)

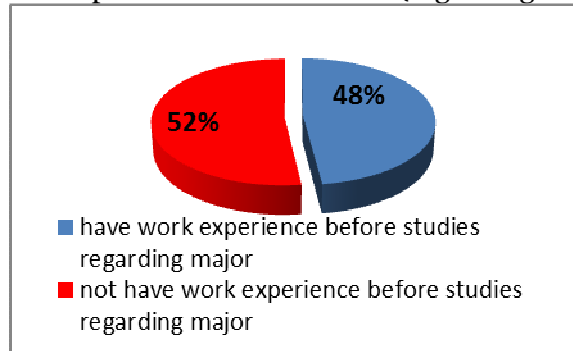
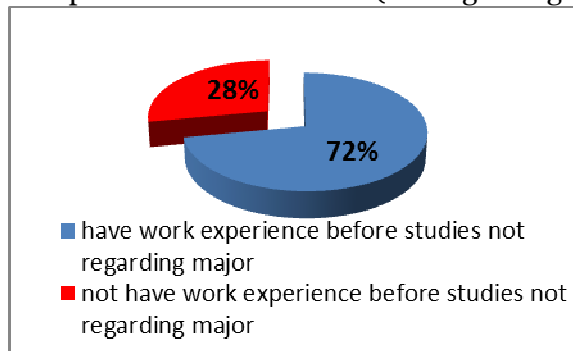


Figure 12. Work experience before studies (not regarding study program)



Regarding work experience during college studies, 64 per cent have had experience which is not connected to their studies, while 70 per cent tried to do a job and gain experience regarding their study program.

Figure 13. Work experience during studies (regarding study program)

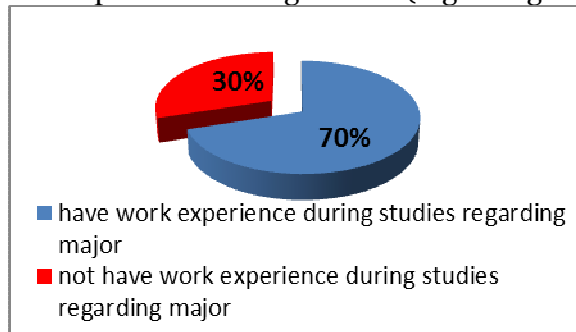
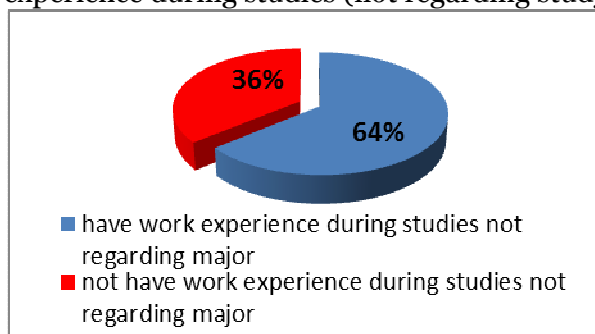


Figure 14: Work experience during studies (not regarding study program)



Working during studies and gaining work experience has both advantages and disadvantages. Students were asked to scale several factors from one to five. The greatest disadvantages that were emphasized by the students were low pay and difficulty to perform well at both places (at college and at workplace), such as: they cannot take the language exam because of work load, they must postpone some college courses, or they have to overwork at the work place due to missing hours spent at college.

Table 8. Disadvantages of working before the degree

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Deviation</i>
Have lower pay compared with the job done.	2.68	1.51
Cannot take language exam on time.	2.42	1.52
Have to work more at work place than others.	2.42	1.29
Have to postpone studies, cannot finish on time.	2.28	1.46
Work was less acknowledged without degree.	2.26	1.29
Have bad academic results.	2.25	1.29
Not entrusted with important tasks.	2.12	1.28
Cannot hand it the thesis on time.	2.06	1.25
Others	1.86	1.08

As far as advantages are concerned, students indicated that it was worth working because they have gained work experience, built professional links and built social capital, and achieved professional successes.

Table 9. Advantages of working before the degree

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Deviation</i>
Gain work experience.	3.89	1.47
Build professional links.	3.77	1.27
Achieve professional success.	3.51	1.37
Provide financial independence and security.	3.35	1.41
Will have secure wok place after taking degree.	2.94	1.54
Others	1.8	1

Focusing on the means of advantages and disadvantages, it must be emphasized that the means of advantages are much higher than that of disadvantages, which implies that students prefer doing a job during their college studies, however hard it is to perform well at both places, because the advantages exceed the disadvantages: students gain more than lose.

Summary

Examining the factors contributing to drop-out, there are several elements can be identified based on other surveys (Molnár, 2011):

- background variables: parental support, income, secondary school results, friend, intercultural relationships;
- system variables: financial support, giving information, rules, regulations, staff's attitude;
- academic factors: teacher-student relationship, counselling, study skills, resources of higher educational institute (sport facilities, library);
- social factors: friends, professional culture, social integration;
- environmental variables: continuous parental support, financial resource;
- attitudes, intentions, psychological processes: student's efficiency, self-development, self-confidence, motivation, stress, alienation, stamina.

In the present survey, the following factors could have been identified out of the above mentioned ones:

- background variables: family connections, income;
- academic factors: study programs, study forms, courses;
- attitudes, intentions: student's efficiency.

This paper focuses on academic factors especially from the viewpoint of final examination and thesis writing. It can be stated that the hypothesis is proved: *the primary reason for drop-out is study progress not according to standard curriculum, as well as thesis writing and its circumstances.*

It can be claimed that students are aware of the reasons for the problem: they cannot take course examinations or cannot finish their thesis, and except for work and family problems their wrong time management as well as their lazy attitude contributes to postponing final examination. As far as having fewer and more easily performable courses in the last term is concerned, it needs more consideration and preparation as the number and succession of courses are defined in the standard curriculum, which has been accredited by educational authorities and cannot be change.

On the other hand, student recommended some factors that can be improved by the management and the staff of the College: they require more central and personal consultations, more exact information about both the final exam and thesis writing, and starting thesis in the last but one semester as compulsory. These three factors could be supplemented with the exact timing of the phases of thesis writing and organizing pre-examination for defending the thesis. All these factors are in the scope of authority of the college management and the head of institutes, so they can be improved even in the next academic term.

Although working before or during college studies has several disadvantages, even day-time students decide to gain work experience before taking degree. Based on the means of advantages and disadvantages, advantages are preferred to disadvantages – regardless the

factors postponing final examination and thesis writing, such as taking the language exam, postponing the studies or having worse results.

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