



Study of the success and dropout in the higher education policy in Europe and V4 countries¹

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Abstract

In Europe, including the Visegrad region (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia), the issue of student success and dropout is increasing in attention among policy makers on both the national and international level. This paper provides an overview of the major policy perspectives on the issue as well as the main categories of measures adopted to stimulate student success. The Visegrad countries show substantial similarities in their policy attitudes, yet they retain differences, in particular how much importance they assign to the agenda. The regional trends are illustrated by the case study of the Czech Republic: although the goal of reducing dropout rates has been included in policy documents since 2000, so far only few measures have been implemented and the dropout rates continue to grow.

Keywords: dropout, higher education policy, student success, Visegrad countries

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Relevance of the issue

The issue of studying success/dropout⁵ in higher education (HE) has received considerable attention mainly in the United States (see for example Berger & Loyd 2005). Since the number of students quitting their university studies has increased across Europe, the European Commission (EC) has started to be alarmed. High dropout rates and excessive duration of studies became considered as expenditure inefficiencies, as well as barriers in human capital development in multiple EC policy documents (EC 2003 a, EC 2003 b, EC 2005).

The European Commission initiated a large-scale international comparative study on dropout policy and related trends in 2014. The study, conducted by the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) in the Netherlands, and the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU) in Norway, was published in late 2015 with the acronym HEDOCE (Vossensteyn et al. 2015).

According to the HEDOCE study, the success/dropout issue is on the policy agenda in most European countries, and in almost half of them it is “very high or high” on their policy agenda. The same is true for countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The Visegrad countries (V4) are represented in all three categories – while not much attention is dedicated to the issue in Slovakia (according to a contributing national expert), it is a subject of discussion in the Czech Republic and Poland, also indicated as a trending issue in Hungary.

Table 1. Importance of study success in national agendas

Importance of study success	Countries
Very high or high on the agenda	Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, Flanders (Belgium), France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden
On the agenda	Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Switzerland
No or little relevance	Bulgaria, Cyprus, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovak Republic, Turkey

Source: HEDOCE Study (Vossensteyn et al. 2015), survey of national experts

Data and methods

The authors of this paper contributed to the HEDOCE study mentioned above as national experts with two policy reports and one in-depth national case study based on a number of observations and interviews with policy-makers and the representatives of higher education institutions (HEIs) leadership. Summaries of the contributions and the case

⁵ Multiple terms are used in literature for phenomena related to student success, such as *completion, graduation, retention, persistence, survival, attainment, re-enrolment* or, eventually, *time-to-degree*. Other terms can be used as equivalent to dropout, e.g. *stop-out, discontinuation, attrition, wastage, turn-over, dismissal, withdrawal* or *student departure*. In this paper, we decided to use “success” and “dropout” over other options to keep in line with the HEDOCE study (Vossensteyn et al. 2015) quoted further.

study were edited by the HEDOCE team and published as annexes to the report. The HEDOCE study (cited as Vossensteyn et al. 2015) is a major source of inspiration as well as of comparative data for this paper. Although this paper builds extensively on data from the study, it focuses on aspects not fully covered by the original report and goes deeper in particular in the Czech Republic case study.

The following country reports have been used as a basis for this paper:

- Czech Republic, written by Aleš Vlk (with the support of Vaclav Švec and Šimon Stiburek) and summarized by Martin Unger (Vossensteyn et al. 2015, Annex 2, p. 31-35),
- Hungary, written by Jozsef Temesi and summarized by Renze Kolster (ibid., Annex 2, p. 76-79),
- Poland, written by Marek Kwiek and summarized by Sabine Wollscheid and Elisabeth Hovdhaugen (ibid., Annex 2, p. 119-121),
- Slovakia, written by Alexandra Bitusikova and summarized by Sabine Wollscheid and Elisabeth Hovdhaugen (ibid., Annex 2, p. 129-130).

Besides those, additional data were collected to elaborate the case study of the Czech Republic. First, we reviewed all the major national strategy documents from 2000 to 2015, as cited below. Second, we conducted additional interviews with HE representatives. Altogether, we interviewed, individually or within a focus group, 13 national policy representatives (Ministry of Education officers, members of the National Accreditation Commission, members of the Higher Education Council, including student members), 15 employees of two selected HEIs (from vice-rectors to lecturers and student advisors), and two groups of students at the same institutions. The average duration of an interview was about 60 minutes.

The context of student success policies

There are multiple reasons leading HE policymakers to consider student dropout as an issue that needs to be solved. However, the perspectives vary among European countries, as well as among stakeholders. Therefore, analyzing the reasoning behind implemented measures is important for understanding differences in national policies and conflicts in policy discussions.

First, dropout can be considered a barrier to access higher education. In regard to the European Union's goal that 40 % of young adults would attain tertiary education by 2020 (see European Commission 2010) and the efforts of many developed countries to raise the overall education level of their populations, high dropout rates can be easily perceived as an obstacle to be dealt with. In some countries, rapid increase of dropout rates significantly eliminated the gain from broadened access to HE over the last two decades, leading to a slower pace of increase in the number of graduates compared to the number of new enrollees. This can be considered a problem both for national competitiveness –

undermining the strategic transition to innovation-based economy and knowledge society – and to the individuals' life chances and social mobility. European institutions in particular, support this perspective.

Second, the efficiency of both public and private spending can be questioned. Extensive amounts of public funds spent on studies not leading to graduation and increasing average time-to-degree have become an increasing concern for authorities in many countries as well as European institutions (see e.g. Quinn 2013). As discussed below, in Visegrad countries this perspective dominates over others.

Third, dropout should be taken seriously also on the institutional level. For example, Wild and Ebbers (2002) see dropout rates as important measures of institutional effectiveness with a broader impact to relevant stakeholders in the higher education system – internal administrators, academic staff, taxpayers, legislators, public policy makers, etc. Ozga and Sukhnandan (2004) argue the importance of dropout in economic terms – they see it as:

- a waste of university resources which are limited;
- damage to the institution's reputation;
- a negative long-term influence on attracting new students.

Fourth, individual consequences of dropout should also be taken into account. Quinn et al. (2005) point out that the dropout experience can substantially affect one's attitudes, leading to loss of motivation and self-confidence, which can even turn into apathy and a sense of inferiority. "Drop out was even seen as hindering young people from being active citizens, for example acting as a barrier to participating in the voluntary sector," (ibid.: 49). Social stigma and other inter-personal consequences can also be related to the dropout experience, particularly when family expectations are not met. Besides, consequences of high student fluctuation might also be observed at the social environment of individual HEIs, weakening the social bonds between faculty and students as well as among students themselves, leading to academic anomie.

Finally, it can be argued that to dropout is not a problem per se, but it is a result of something else going on in higher education. As Quinn et al. (ibid.) claim, increasing dropout rates are not an inevitable effect of broad access but rather a sign of low sensibility to the needs of a diverse student body and a lack of student-centered thinking in HE. In this perspective, one can conclude that HEIs are losing their ability to attract students, offer them something worthwhile, and stimulate their enthusiasm for the chosen field of study. In other words, this is close to what Tinto (1993) calls integration as a main driver of a student experience at the university. In this respect, not only are students who drop out affected but the quality of education of those who make it to graduation is at stake.

Regardless of which perspective one prefers, the steady rise of dropout rates makes the issue difficult to neglect. Unfortunately, there are no internationally comparable data on

student success in Europe, and inevitably, different calculation methods and definitions lead to mutually incomparable results (Vossensteyn et al. 2015: 30-32). Therefore, only little is known about the actual development in an international perspective but the trend might be illustrated on the national level, in this case utilizing the Czech data.⁶

In our contribution we focus mainly on the national level with respect to the public higher education policy and accompanied measures. At the same time also some aspects of institutional policy are discussed.

Student success policies in Europe

In the HEDOCE study (Vossensteyn et al. 2015) 170 national and institutional policy measures adopted in the last ten years with an explicit aim to support student success were identified in 35 participating countries. This figure itself indicates that a lot of attention has been paid to this issue in Europe in recent years.

Authors of the study divide the measures into three broader groups based on the policy instruments applied. These are:

- Funding and financial incentives,
- Information and support for students,
- Organization of higher education.

The category of **funding measures and financial incentives** covers both stimuli for institutions and students. Dropout or completion rates have been reflected in funding formulas, and project-based resources have been dedicated to programs so as to develop institutional capacity to support student success e.g. by quality teaching, advisory or infrastructure. Attempts have been made to change students' behavior and decisions by positive stimuli (grants, loans, need- or merit-based scholarships, tuition waivers) as well as sanctions such as cost-sharing and extra fees for slow progressing individuals.

Moreover, in the case of **measures based on information and support** there are multiple target groups affected. Access to information for applicants has been in focus in multiple countries in order to improve their study program choices, and to reduce the mismatch between programs and students' preferences and abilities. Mentoring and counselling have been provided to students in many aspects, covering both academic and non-academic (health, housing, funding, etc.) issues as well as, for example, career counselling to stimulate students' motivation for learning. Finally, initiatives have been taken to provide advisory to institutions (lecturers, administrators and managers),

⁶ Data from the Czech Republic were chosen to illustrate the trend taking into account the following factors: First, authors have good access to the data and can interpret them correctly with respect to the actual method of collection and calculation applied. Second, this case is presumably more relevant for the focus of the paper than data from a non-V4 country. However, it is not an intention of the authors to anticipate that the situation is the same in other Visegrad countries or in the rest of Europe.

spread experience and good practice, and monitor student progression to create a solid empirical background for further policy-making.

Changes in **organization of higher education** cover measures to increase flexibility, simplify credit transfer, and recognition to meet the needs of non-traditional learners. In many countries, student success is also reflected in external quality assurance and accreditation processes as HEIs are incentivized to adapt the curriculum in order to stimulate students' engagement and motivation, e.g. by emphasizing straightforward links from curricula to later career chances and labor market needs. Lastly, changes in admission procedures have taken place, HEIs are expected to select applicants with the best chances of completing their studies.

Student success policies in Visegrad countries

The HEDOCE study (Vossensteyn et al. 2015) includes a set of country reports written by national experts covering, among others, all the V4 countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia). We used these reports as a source of data for secondary analysis to look for aspects not fully covered by the original study.

In the reports, we identified joint aspects across the region as well as differences in the attention dedicated to the topic in the national policies. Undoubtedly, in every country, there is a broad range of perspectives and opinions backed by various stakeholders including academics. Yet, certain aspects, predominant in all four countries, might be extracted, indicating a shared ideological and cultural background for the policy discussion.

First, student dropout is often perceived as a direct result of broadening access to Central European HE systems over the past decades. The changing structure of the student body, in particular in relation to individuals' cognitive capacities, is considered a key limit for student success and, in some cases, high dropout is explicitly mentioned as an instrument to keep the "quality" of education high.

Second, in the case that dropout is being considered a problematic issue, the claim is usually grounded in economic reasoning. In particular, but not exclusively, in Hungary low success is considered an issue of cost-efficiency for the HE system, and stakeholders highlight that investing resources into numerous studies not leading to graduation is a waste. In line with that, in all four countries, the time-to-degree aspect of student success is often emphasized over completion. Adopted measures tend to focus on stimulating students to finish their studies on time rather than on prevention of dropout and failure.

Third, although a different priority is assigned to success policy in the individual V4 countries, in none of them does it dominate the agenda. Employability of graduates, quality of education, international reputation of universities and research performance are usually prioritized over student success. Moreover, these priorities are considered to be, to a certain extent, in conflict with student success. Efforts to improve the quality of

teaching and career relevance of curricula are rarely mentioned as a way to increase success rates.

In line with the previous points, the V4 countries jointly ignore a range of measures that can be implemented in order to face student dropout. Despite extensive theoretical reasoning (see e.g. Larsen et al. 2013) only small measures have been taken to stimulate student success. Among these are better integration of newcomers to the academic community and encouraging student engagement. However, further measures such as experience sharing and mutual learning among HEIs leadership, lecturers or non-academic staff, present in some other European countries, were never mentioned as a measure in the reports.

Nevertheless, one measure is shared across the four countries – fees for students exceeding standard duration studies. It was introduced first in the Czech Republic in 1999, and most recently in Poland in 2013 where the constitutional court abolished them in 2014 for being in conflict with the Constitution. The explicit aim of the fees is to motivate students to complete their degree on time.

Despite the similarities mentioned above, the V4 countries differ in the scope to which success policy has been developed so far and in the amount of measures adopted. According to the reports, **Hungary** seems to be a regional leader in this respect. Following an excited national debate on the efficiency of HE, a complex policy was developed covering a broad range of measures. These include changes in tuition fees policy, students' and applicants' information support and advisory, as well as the reflection of dropout and completion data in external quality assurance processes.

In **Poland** and the **Czech Republic**, measures were taken to improve study success but these were more limited in number as well as in scope of implementation. Options for a success policy are discussed but the topic is not being assigned a very high priority and it remains controversial in the academia. Finally, according to the report, in **Slovakia**, only a few measures have been adopted so far, and the topic is in general low on the agenda.

Case study of the Czech Republic

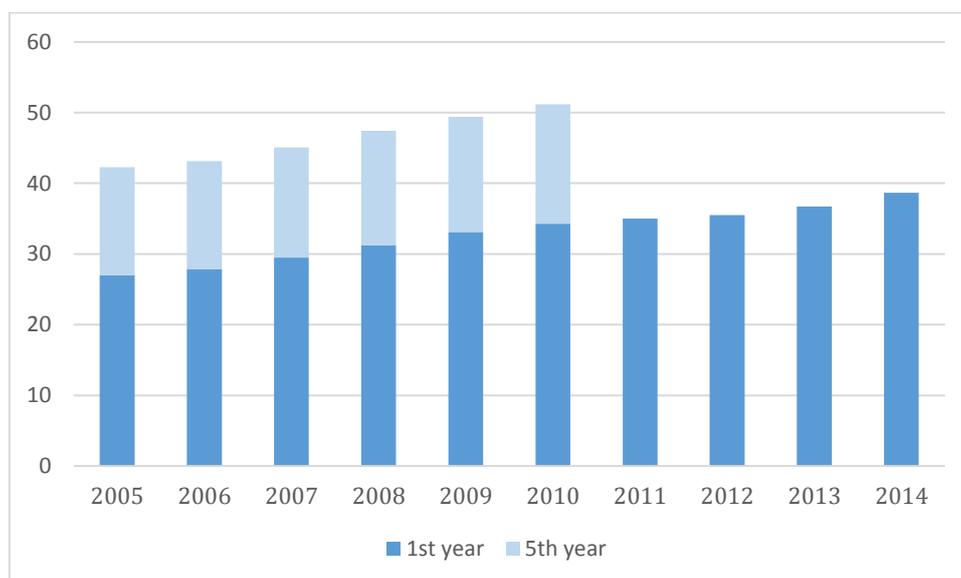
The subsequent text demonstrates the establishment of success / dropout policy on a case study of the Czech Republic. Although no individual country is fully representative of an entire region, taking a more specific look at one case allows us to illustrate some of the general trends, with concrete examples and thus, deepen our understanding of the actual development.

In this chapter, “dropout” is referred to at the level of individual study, i.e. each time a student quits a particular study program (regardless to whether she/he studies somewhere else or not), she/he is calculated into the dropout rate as discussed below. In line, when referring to “completion”, we evaluate the graduation from a particular study program, regardless to whether the student studies also somewhere else or whether

she/he completed another program before. In both cases, the entire enrolment cohort is the denominator. Dropout rates calculated according to these definitions are naturally higher than they would be if program-switching were not be considered discontinuation.

Based on analysis of the data retrieved from the national student register, we see that while “only” 27% of students who enrolled into a full-time undergraduate program in the Czech Republic in 2005 dropped out within the first year of studies, the rate grew gradually to 39% in the 2014 cohort. Simultaneously, the 2010 cohort was the first one out of which more than half of the students discontinued their studies within the first five years after enrolment – and the increasing trend does not slow down.

Fig. 1: Dropout rates (on the level of individual programs), bachelor program students, Czech Republic.



Source: national student register data, authors' own calculation. Only full-time students are included. Each column represents an individual enrolment cohort (students enrolled in the respective year to a bachelor study program). The lower value indicates proportion of enrolled students who drop out within the first year of their studies, the higher one the cumulative proportion of those who drop out over the first five years.⁷

The dropout has been dominantly concentrated in the first and second year of studies – 44% of the students who started their study in 2011 discontinued in the two years after their enrolment, compared to only 7% in the following two years. The freshmen year is also the one with the largest increase in the dropout rates, rising from 27% in 2003 to 39% for students who started their studies in 2014. The dropout rates are high in particular in engineering fields, followed by natural sciences, where the dropout rates continue to increase alarmingly.

In contrast, the dropout rates are rather stable for master's level studies with only minor fluctuations and are also much lower – “only” 20% of students discontinued their study

⁷ No aggregation has been applied to the data, dropout within each individual study program is analysed separately - i.e. a substantial proportion of the students dropping out re-enrol later or continue to study in a different study programme.

within the first four years in 2003-2011 on average. At the postgraduate level, minor increase in the dropout prevalence can be observed, but it has been rather evenly distributed across individual study years.

Significant differences in the dropout rate can be seen among individual disciplines (study fields) as well as individual institutions (universities) and their parts (faculties). For example, for bachelor studies started in 2009 the completion rate can vary from 8.6% at a particular faculty of mechanical engineering to 87.9% at a faculty of health care. A completion rate higher than 70% can be almost exclusively observed in the fields of medicine and arts.

A brief overview of the policy development in the Czech Republic is provided in the following paragraphs to illustrate policy initiatives and specific measures taken on the national level.

As early as in 2000, when the first HE Strategic Plan was adopted, dropout was identified as a problem; particularly, in relation to flexibility of study pathways and student-program mismatch (MEYS 2000). In contrast, the successive Strategic Plan adopted in 2005 (effective during 2006-2010) highlights exclusively the perspective of economic efficiency and relates the causes of dropout increase explicitly to broadened access (MYES 2005). In this respect, this Strategic Plan is fully in line with the V4-level observations described in the previous part. Moreover, interviews with HE leadership representatives conducted by the authors of this paper ten years later came to very similar findings, indicating that the perspectives reflected in the Strategic Plan remain widespread in the academic community.

The subsequent HE White Paper (MYES 2009) and Strategic Plan 2011-2015 (MYES 2010) paid only very little attention to the issue. As late as 2014, within the Framework for HE Development (MYES 2014), a student success agenda was reflected in detail for the first time and, also for the first time, were the measures proposed grounded on at least some analysis of available data. However, the shift was enforced to a great extent by the requirements of the European Commission putting emphasis on student success and demanding the issue be covered by a strategic framework before the approval of operational programs of the European Structural and Investment Fund (as confirmed in the interviews).

The latest Strategic Plan for 2016-2020 (MYES 2015) follows the Framework for HE Development and builds on its proposals. Compared to all the previous documents, it brings the most specific measures for success policy, and a quantitative goal – 60 % of undergraduate studies started in 2015 should be completed successfully within the standard duration plus one year (i.e. in 4 to 5 years, depending on the program). Nevertheless, dropout remains a second-tier policy on the agenda.

Throughout the time period, a number of measures on various levels have been considered. In the early years, increasing the flexibility of HE was the only and vague proposal. In the subsequent period, introduction of tuition fees (which never came to effect), restructuring of study programs (referred to also as “the Bologna process”) and implementation of professional / applied programs (finally taking place in 2016) together with students’ advisory were flagships of success policy. After 2014, strategic documents started to highlight the necessity of analyzing the causes of dropout deeper. In particular, on the level of individual institutions and programs. Various aspects such as social integration and role of lecturers are mentioned for the first time, however, the major focus remains on institutional-specific strategies grounded on data-collection and analysis, which is suggested to be required by external quality assurance mechanisms.

It must be stated that most of the measures included in the strategic plans have never been implemented. Many of them were in the form of indirect stimuli and recommendations to HEIs which are not directly enforceable. As Švec et al. (2015) describe, these recommendations rarely affect the actual behavior of HEIs since other environmental pressures, particularly related to funding mechanisms, are much stronger. In this respect, ignoring soft stimuli and focusing one’s strategy on key threats and opportunities can be considered rational, although it might lead to side-lining the essential mission of higher education in society. Moreover, lack of awareness of the issue and subjective beliefs of HEIs leadership members affect the institutional policies, as described in the national report in the HEDOCE study (Vossensteyn et al. 2015).⁸

To sum up the development on the national level: study success and dropout have been on the agenda of the national policy in the Czech Republic at least since 2000 but have never become the top priority. The economic reasoning was dominant in the period of 2005-2010. However, interviews with HEIs leadership representatives confirm that it is still vivid in the community, together with the belief that the broadened access is the primary source of the dropout increase. Several measures were suggested to stimulate study success but many of them were too vague, indirect in effect, and therefore often remained unimplemented. Although there may be initiatives taken on the national level or some at the level of individual institutions and departments, study success policy is not a priority for the majority of HEIs since it is not directly linked to funding. Currently, an emphasis is being put on the enforcement of institutional-level analysis and measures in order to reflect the specific features of individual HEIs and disciplines.

We can also give a short overview of the main development on the institutional level. When analyzing public documents (yearly reports and strategic plans) and interviewing

⁸ However, it is to be pointed out that this article builds on interviews conducted in 2014 and 2015. More recent data indicate the situation in Czech HEIs is gradually changing and the topic of dropout becomes important due to an increasing competition for students in the time of demographic decline. Nevertheless, in the time of submitting this paper, our 2016 interviews were not completed and the data processed properly.

the leadership of selected Czech higher education institutions, we observed the following prevailing trends. First, we can see that the study success issue has been paid increased attention by almost all higher education institutions in the Czech Republic. Second, institutions with higher dropout rates pay more attention to the topic. Third, Czech higher education institutions seem not to reflect adequately some important factors influencing the study success (for example student social integration), therefore they are not able to use all available approaches to address the issue.

Conclusions and discussion

Although the HEDOCE study (Vossensteyn et al. 2015) contributed substantially to the mapping of the policy initiatives in place, very little is known about which measures are the most effective (and efficient) to stimulate student success, and should therefore be recommended for implementation in other HE systems. Evaluation of the actual effects of measures in international comparison has been very limited so far. There are at least three essential barriers for such initiatives:

First, there is no common understanding of the actual phenomena that would be shared across the EU countries. Definitions often vary even within one country and there is no consensus on what should be considered dropout. Do we take those students who switch programs or move from one HEI to another as dropouts? What about those who discontinue their studies for a couple of years and come back later? Should we impose time limits for successful completion? These and other questions are answered differently in individual countries, and therefore, it is impossible to compare the data.

Second, even if a shared understanding of success and dropout is reached, a consensus on the method and calculation of dropout rates would be needed. Data aggregated on different levels (single study program, HEI, discipline, level of study, national system ...) will provide different results. Multiple indicators (completion rate, dropout rate, retention rate) as well as methods (true cohort vs. cross-section) are applicable – for more information see Vossensteyn et al. (2015: 30-37). Even relatively minor differences in data collection procedures and computational methods might lead to substantial variation in results.

Third, even if comparable data were collected in all countries and one method was used to calculate the dropout rates, effectiveness of individual measures would be difficult to estimate. The effect of a single measure can hardly be separated from a broader policy mix. It can be expected that the outcomes of individual policy programs will be affected by other policy actions as well as by the specific culture and social environment of each country, HEI and department. Moreover, due to the complexity of policy-making processes, identical measures are rarely implemented in two or more countries.

We can further state that **study success policy** is currently formed in many European countries with substantial variance in the instruments and measures applied, priority

assigned, as well as the reasoning of the issue adopted by dominant stakeholders. Although a direct comparison of effects of individual policy mixes is hardly possible due to a lack of shared definitions and incomparable outcome data in European countries, the area still represents an interesting opportunity for research of higher education policy formation and governance on institutional, national, and international level.

Visegrad countries are of special interest to us due to their geographical proximity, shared communist past and a rapid post-revolutionary development of higher education systems. A short review of major student success initiatives in the V4 countries reveals substantial similarities in the policy trends.

In all V4 countries increased dropout rates are considered to be a result of broadening access to HE, the issue is dealt with in particular in terms of economic efficiency and in no country does the topic dominate the agenda. Although numerous measures are mentioned in the country reports, improvement in student success has rarely been their only or main goal. The impact of dropout policies has rarely been evaluated so far, and if so, the time-to-degree aspect is usually emphasized over completion. On the other hand, a substantial part of the measures was implemented in 2011 or later, so more evaluations can be expected to come.

It seems that V4 countries in general share a rather similar approach toward the study success and dropout issue. It is taken as an indispensable and integral part of the higher education system – as an independent variable which cannot or should not be changed. Despite rich theoretical literature emphasizing a significant role of social and academic integration and individual needs, almost no measures along these lines have been neither initiated nor implemented.

One can say that the systems have not yet fully undergone a systemic internal change taking into account a fundamental shift from the elite into the mass or more recently even the universal higher education.⁹ A universal system requires different approaches and techniques in order to accommodate a more diversified student body and individuals with various needs and expectations. It seems that many leaders of the higher education institutions (and not only them) in the V4 countries are still “mentally” operating in the elite system while facing a system which has changed significantly. In addition, unlike many Western European countries, the transition from the elite system into the (almost) universal one took less than 25 years.

Presumably, a more detailed comparative exercise across the region would allow us to reflect similar values and beliefs driving the HE development shared in the four countries. It seems that historical, social, and political experience connected with the communist regimes after the Second World War still plays a very important role in how various issues

⁹ Mass higher education is usually considered when it contains at least 15 percent of the relevant age cohort and universal when at least 50 percent of the age cohort participates (Trow, 1972).

are approached and dealt with. Some aspects of the dropout topic, such as its controversy and normative ambiguity, are a good case to start with when exploring these hidden driving forces behind the policy discussions.

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