



**Focus on the dropout students' secondary  
school experience and career orientation**

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**Cintia Csók<sup>1</sup>, Anett Hrabéczy<sup>2</sup> & Dóra Katalin Németh<sup>3</sup>**

**Abstract**

We examined the characteristics of the respondents before entering higher education along with the clusters. We have discovered the characteristics of secondary school studies and further education, the circumstances for applying for higher education. During the analysis of secondary school studies, we took into account the type of class they studied in high school (in Hungary, they can study in high school, vocational high school, and secondary school), and how many times they changed school. In addition, we compared the results based on school maintainers. There is a significant correlation between the reasons for high-school experience and the dropout rate. In terms of cluster-based differences, it should be emphasized that the expectation of social mobility was overrepresented among the dropouts due to financial reasons and work, but it was also an important aspect that they did not have to pay a fee in the program where they studied. In addition, in the case of those who were disappointed in training and further education, it was most common to apply to the university because they did not want to work and could afford it. Our results can help to develop more effective dropout

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<sup>1</sup> Doctoral Program on Educational Sciences, University of Debrecen, Egyetem tér 1., 4032 Debrecen, Hungary, Email address: [csokcintia@gmail.com](mailto:csokcintia@gmail.com), ORCID: [0000-0002-2296-480X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2296-480X)

<sup>2</sup> Doctoral Program on Educational Sciences, University of Debrecen, Egyetem tér 1., 4032 Debrecen, Hungary, Email address: [hrabeczyanett@gmail.com](mailto:hrabeczyanett@gmail.com), ORCID: [0000-0003-4780-5933](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4780-5933)

<sup>3</sup> Benedek Elek Faculty of Pedagogy, University of Sopron, Ferenczy J. u. 5., Sopron 9400, Hungary, Email address: [nmthdr@gmail.com](mailto:nmthdr@gmail.com), ORCID: [0000-0002-3716-3888](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3716-3888)

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protection for students entering higher education, both in public and higher education institutions and career orientation.

**Keywords:** higher education, dropout, career orientation

## **Introduction**

Higher education expansion in Hungary has not only increased the number of its students, but also the number of those who leave higher education without a diploma (Szemerszki, 2018). The Bologna system (introduced in Hungary since 2006) has not been able to effectively eliminate a large number of dropouts (Wolter et al., 2014 as cited in Pusztai, 2018). Although experts agree that the reasons for dropouts do not necessarily arise during the years of higher education, their remedy is, however, a priority for this educational level (Pusztai, 2018).

The study career of students dropping out of tertiary education is an unexplored area, and we do not have reliable data on the examination of the secondary school career either (Szemerszki, 2018). For a comprehensive, multidimensional approach, our analysis focuses on the high-school period, the motivation for further education, and extra points received when applying for higher education.

Papula (2008) summarizes the individual and social determinants of career choice as follows: personality (knowledge, biological heritage, self-knowledge, general and specific abilities, attitudes, achievements, interests, needs, and values), community, knowledge of their profession, labor market needs, educational attainment, the prestige of the profession, family background (education of parents, the parenting style, family values, and the place of the child in the family), socioeconomic status, and social structure (Csók et al., 2018).

In addition, career choice can be greatly influenced by the admission score obtained during the admission process and the extra points that can be earned. Based on the current Higher Education Act and the Government Decree on the Higher Education Admission Procedure, extra points may be claimed based on equal opportunities, study performance, and achievements. According to the literature, students claiming extra points on equal opportunities can be classified as non-traditional students (among them are disadvantaged and cumulatively disadvantaged, disabled, ethnic group members, and parents of little children; Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2007; Harper & Quayle, 2009). Their appearance in higher education can be dated at the turn of the millennium (Fenyves et al., 2017; Pusztai, 2011; Pusztai & Szabó, 2014) and, according to the literature, they have a higher dropout risk compared to traditional students (Fenyves et al., 2017).

In the framework of the NKFI research of the Center for Higher Education Research and Development of the University of Debrecen, we conducted our analysis using the

questionnaire survey database (Departure 2018) among the dropout students. The research team formed four groups of dropouts: (a) students who are disappointed in their studies and further education, (b) students who are uncertain about the reason for dropping out, (c) due to learning difficulties, and (d) dropout due to financial reasons and work (Kovács et al., 2019). Along these lines, we examined the period before entering higher education.

### Secondary School Studies

As the first step in the study, we were curious about what experiences the respondents had in their secondary school studies. Of the 605 respondents surveyed, 12% of the respondents switched schools during their high-school years. Of these, 4.5% four or more times went to other secondary schools, 11.9% of the school-changing respondents three times, 19.4% twice, and 64.2% once. About 38.4% of the respondents completed their secondary education in secondary school and 61.6% did in high school. The majority of dropout students went to state schools (81.2%) and 15.6% went to church schools. In lower numbers, 13 and 5 people are represented by foundational and private secondary schools (2.4% and 0.9%, respectively). Seventy-five percent of the respondents received the higher education institution they had originally wanted. It seems there is a connection between school changes and school types as well. Thirteen percent of those graduating from secondary school belonged to school leavers, whereas 11.9% of high-school students came to another institution, whose rate is not considered to be extremely high overall (Figure 1).

However, the highest proportion of pupils in foundational schools changed schools during their high-school years. Regarding the number of school changes, there is a significant correlation between the number of school changes and the school maintainer ( $\chi^2$  test,  $p = .016$ ). Simultaneously, there is a correlation between the possibility of school change

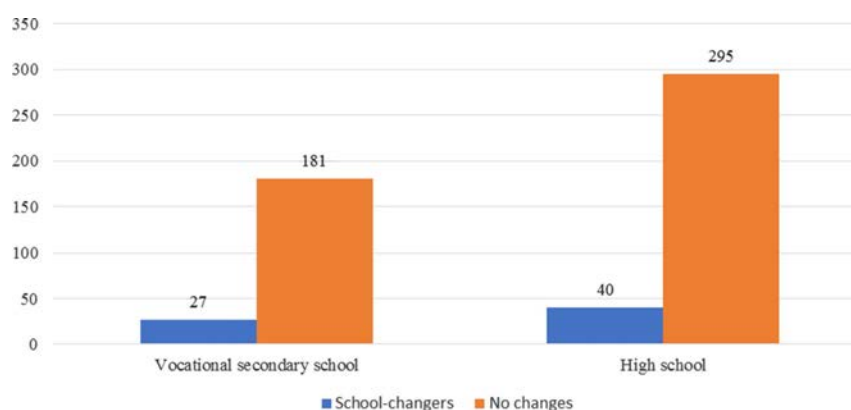


Figure 1. The number of school leavers and their proportion among vocational secondary school and high-school students (N = 476). Source: Departure (2018)

and the type of training attended in the year of graduation ( $p = .030$ ); in the case of students studying in the evening classes, the proportion of school leavers is the highest, whereas in the case of full-time students, it is less typical. Based on the figure below, it can be seen that multiple school changes are more likely to occur in the case of full-time students, but there is no significant correlation (Figure 2).

### Reasons for School-Changing and Dropout

About 90.2% of the respondents who indicated financial and employment problems did not change schools. The highest percentage of school dropouts due to learning difficulties can be found at secondary school, while the correlation is not significant. If we compare the reasons for the dropout and the type of secondary school of the subjects, we can conclude that the reasons for the dropout and the fact that the respondent graduated from secondary school or high school have a significant correlation ( $p = .048$ ). About 61.5% of those who drop out for financial reasons completed their secondary school studies at a high school. The highest proportion of high-school students is among those who lose their motivation (70.8%), and the lowest rate is found in the cluster of dropouts due to learning difficulties (54.4%). Among the dropouts due to learning difficulties are the highest number of vocational secondary school students (45.6%), and the lowest proportion in the cluster of those who are disappointed in their studies and the institutions (29.2%; Figure 3).

We did not find any significant correlation between dropout clusters and whether the students studied in full-time, evening, or correspondence time training ( $p = .079$ ). Among the uncertain subjects, the proportion of evening-training students is the highest (5.1%),

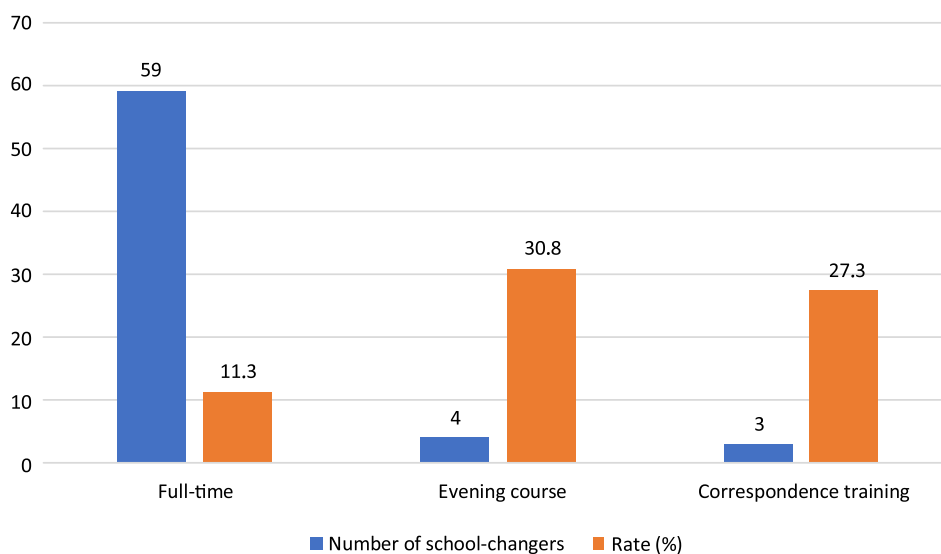


Figure 2. The number of school leavers in each class (66). Source: Departure (2018)

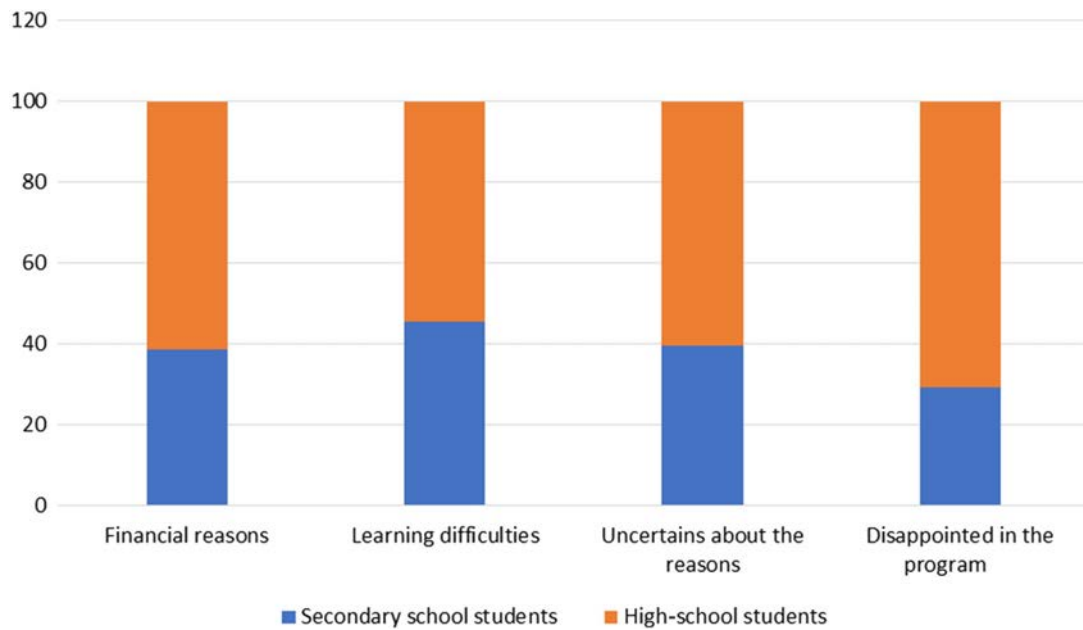


Figure 3. Reason for dropping out and type of high school ( $\chi^2$  test, NS; N = 553). Source: *Departure* (2018)

and the correspondent time-training students are the most represented here as well. The highest rates of full-time students (98.5%) are among those who are disappointed in the program and further education. Compared to dropout clusters, the highest number of students who are uncertain about the reasons is the evening, (61.5%) and the correspondent (50%), but based on the answers, there is no significant correlation between the graduates and the reasons for dropout. The division between clusters does not show a significant correlation with the school maintainer. However, it can be stated that dropouts due to learning difficulties and uncertain reasons are the highest among students coming from state schools, while those in church schools have nominated financial reasons and loss of motivation (Figure 4).

### Career Orientation and Extra Points When Applying for Higher Education

We can categorize the factors that influence further education. In addition to individual and contextual systematization (Guay, Senecal, Gauthier, & Fernet, 2003; Papula, 2008; Patton & McMahon, 1997; Olteanu, 2015), some typologies are focusing on material, social, or cultural capital-like components (Fényes & Pusztai, 2004; Lannert, 2004; Pusztai & Verdes, 2002). To have a comprehensive, multifaceted approach, we focused our analysis on post-secondary studies, learning motives, and extra points on different titles. In our research, we discovered that the dropout students who did not start their higher education studies directly after the school-leaving exam, what they did later. The majority of the respondents spent time with work (most of them in their own country) or with learning.

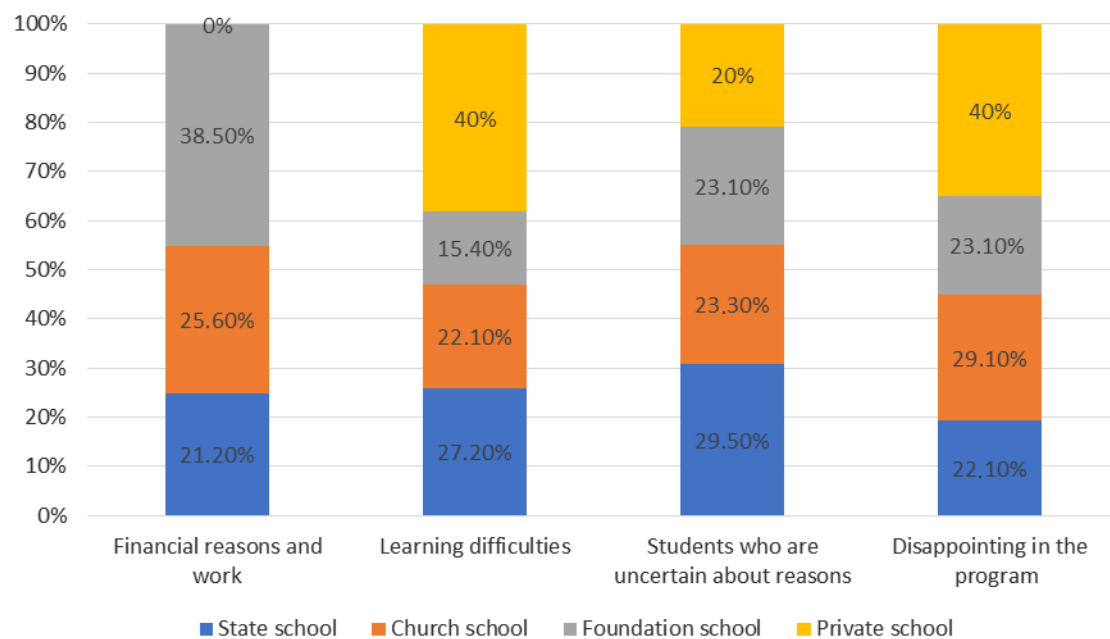


Figure 4. The relationship between school maintainers and dropouts ( $\chi^2$  test, NS;  $N = 552$ ). Source: Departure (2018)

The proportion of those who were unemployed (nine people), those who were in “GYES” (childcare assistance in Hungary; six people) or were involved in a public work program (five people) could be considered relatively low in the detour group. From the comparison with the clusters, it can be seen that, before entering higher education, the proportion of people working in the home country was overrepresented among the uncertain students (Adj. resid. = 2.1), but the most typical form of activity for the dropouts for financial reasons was the same. Those who dropped out for study and institutional reasons, in addition to learning, have also indicated this at the highest rate (Figure 5).

As an explanation, students’ employment is becoming more frequent and the causes of this phenomenon are complex (Bocsi, 2015; Gáti & Róbert, 2013; Kocsis, 2017). Making money-seeking activities – especially for non-traditional students participating in state-funded training – has enabled the financial conditions needed to maintain student life (Bocsi, 2015), which may extend to the period before inflow into higher education. In the case of respondents disappointed in the program, working was also in the second place, but several of them did not study in traditional higher education (e.g., higher-level vocational training). According to the literature, in the case of disadvantaged students with weaker academic performance, higher-level vocational training can be a kind of opportunity to facilitate entry into BA/BSc-level training (Fehérvári, 2014; Polónyi, 2014; Reisz, 2009).

The majority of dropout students came to higher education because of their desire for knowledge (87.5%). It has proved to be a very influential factor to find a job easier with a

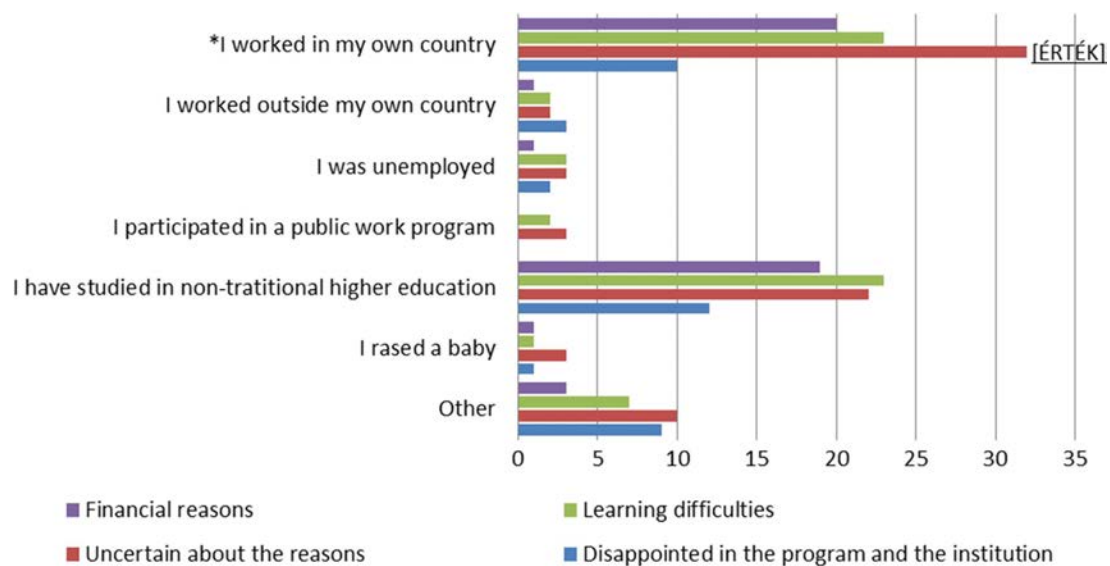


Figure 5. Distribution of activities performed in the period between secondary and higher education in the clusters of dropouts (%) ( $\chi^2$  test,  $p = .027$ ;  $N = 605$ ). Source: Departure (2018). The absolute value of the adjusted residuals for the underlined values is greater than 2

diploma (76.2%) and a profitable job (68.8%), as well as a desire for a recognized profession (68.2%). More than half of the respondents had the hope of social mobility (57.5%) and the creation of multiple relationships (54.4%), as well as the lack of tuition fees (54.2%) and the geographical proximity of the institution (51.2%). However, it was less decisive in decision-making that the person could afford financially (32.5%), did not want to work (24.5%), follow a family tradition (18.8%), or meet the job requirement (17.7%).

In the following, we examined the relationships between further study aspirations and clusters of dropout students. Figure 6 shows that in all groups the decision of the respondents was mainly influenced by the increase of knowledge and easier positioning with the degree. Our results are in line with the results of Márkus (2015), who, based on the data of a large-scale, quantitative research on the Partium (an area inhabited by Hungarians in Romania), found that the main motivation of those applying for higher education is the desire for knowledge, besides the hope of more favorable labor market opportunities. Regarding the differences between clusters, it should be emphasized that the expectation of social mobility (69.6%, Adj. resid. = 3.1) was overrepresented among the dropouts due to material reasons and work and that no tuition fees had to be paid for the program they participated (66.2%, Adj. resid. = 3.0). Furthermore, it was the most typical of those who were disappointed in their studies and further education that they did not want to work (32.0%, Adj. resid. = 2.2) and could afford it financially (43.0%, Adj. resid. = 2.8; Figure 6).

In the following, we examined how the clusters with different dropout patterns can be described based on the extra points used during applying higher education.

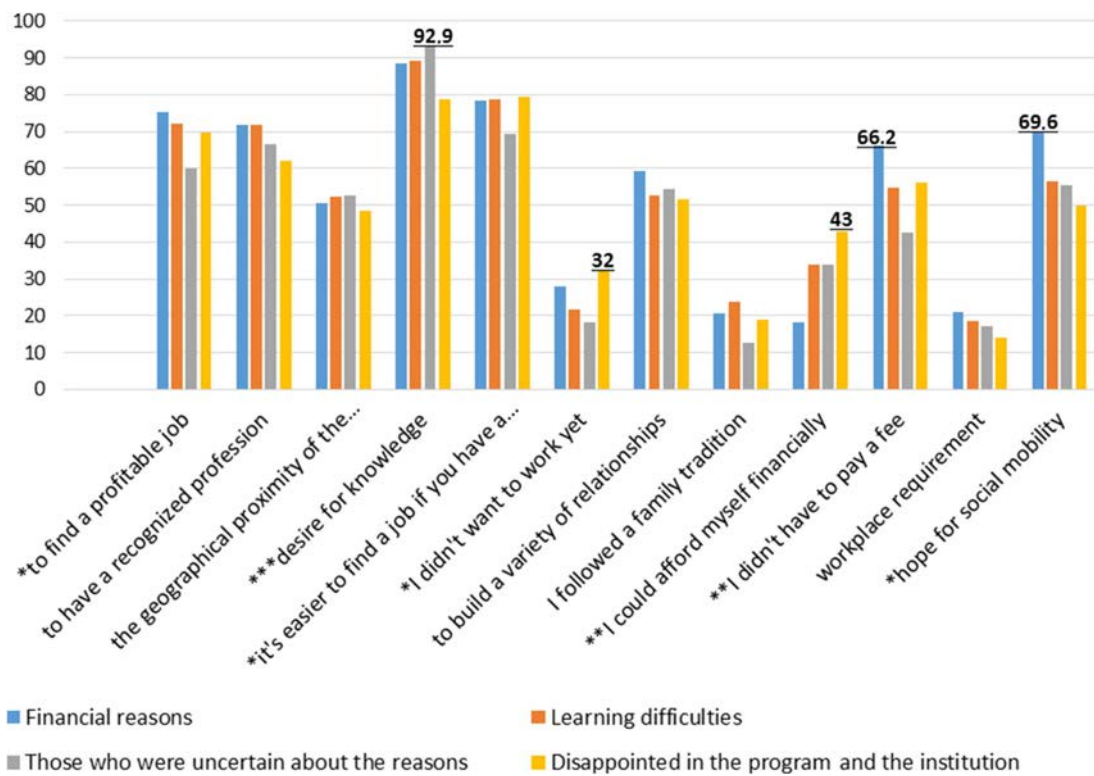


Figure 6. Distribution of learning motivation in dropout clusters (%) ( $\chi^2$  test,  $N = 605$ ) ( $*p \leq .05$ .  $**p \leq .01$ .  $***p \leq .001$ ). Source: Departure (2018). The absolute value of the adjusted residuals for the underlined values is greater than 2

Although we expected that the dropout rate for outstanding academic performance among school dropouts would be low, the answers show the following distribution. Most of them were awarded extra points due to the passing of an advanced-level school-leaving exam among dropout respondents, representing 30.5% of the total sample. The proportion of those who have a language exam is also high. Their proportion is 28.2%. Although the group of those claiming extra points for disadvantage is the third in the row based on the proportions; however, the proportion of those who have reached the advanced-level school-leaving exam and language exam is lagging, whereas the proportion of those claiming extra points for disadvantage is 9.5%. The proportion of those with advanced-level language exam is 8.9% of the sample and 8.5% of the OKJ degree (a form of adult education in Hungary). Percentage of students requiring extra points for sports competitions is 4.3%, and, in the case of study competition, the rate is 3.3%. There is a low proportion of people with multiple disadvantages, people with disabilities, ethnic group members, and parents of little children. Their ratio is 2.9%, 1.9%, and 1%–1%. The low proportion of those claiming additional points on equal opportunities is the same as in the literature and earlier researches, which show that they are present in higher education in a very small number. If we look at the reasons for dropouts, among those who got different extra points, it appears that dropouts due to educational reasons are among those with an advanced-level school-leaving exam, advanced-level language exam, those



who got extra points for study competitions, and people with disabilities are very high (Figure 7). The financial reasons are most common for those who are in a disadvantageous and cumulative disadvantage, as well as those who require extra points for OKJ certification. The disappointment in the program is higher among those who have passed the intermediate language exam than other reasons, and the uncertainty in the causes is typical of students belonging to the ethnic group and requiring extra points for sports performance. In the case of qualified respondents, students who are disappointed in the course are underrepresented. This suggests that a certain degree of deepening in the professions of their choice has already taken place before the start of higher education. This deepening can increase the commitment to studies and the chosen degree of science, serving as a retaining force during the higher education years.

Compared to students who have received extra points for equal opportunities and outstanding performance (Figure 7), dropout students have a higher percentage of those who have earned extra points for some outstanding performance, including advanced-level school-leaving exam and intermediate language exam. However, as the data are not suitable for examining how many percent of people who are eligible for the various extra

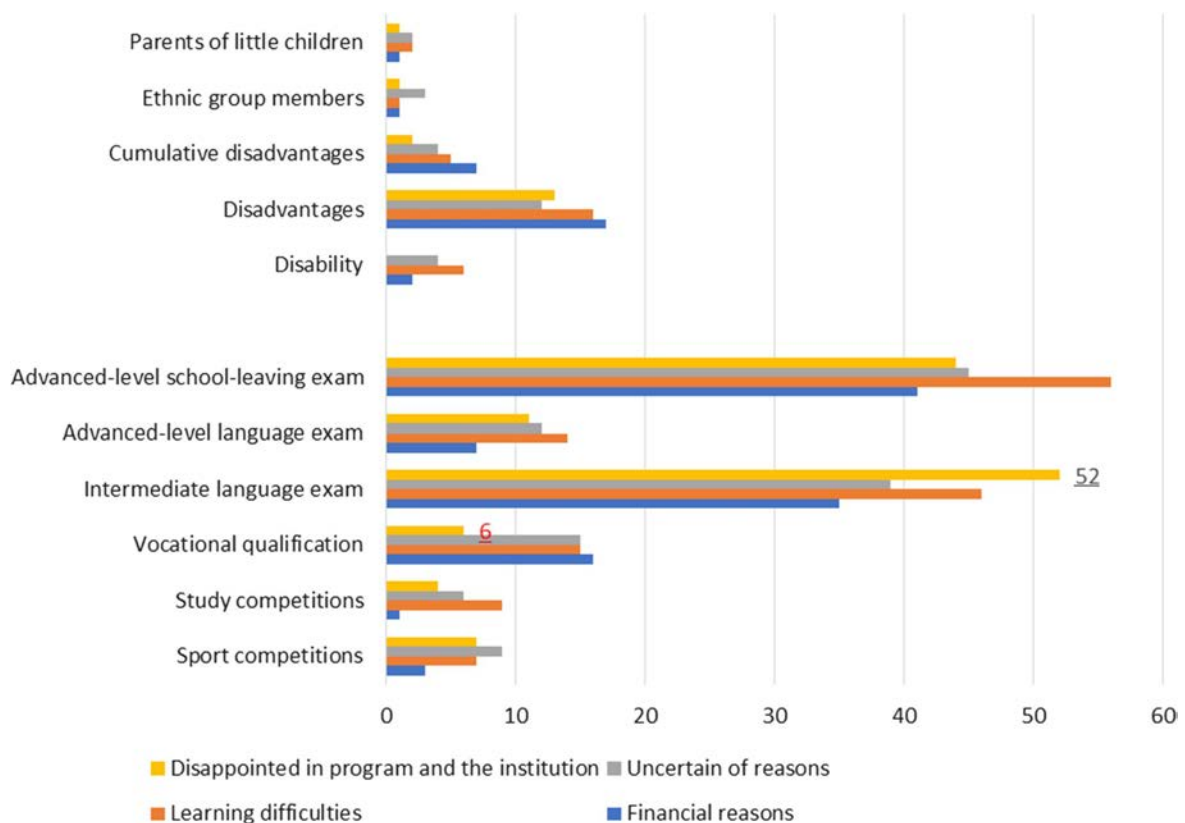


Figure 7. The proportion of those eligible for different extra points in clusters of dropouts (%) (Quarter test, NS; N = 605). Source: Departure (2018). The figure is shown separately for those who qualify for bonus points (above) and extra performance (below)

points are crumbling, and the current results do not show a significant correlation along the clusters studied, we cannot make clear statements about which groups are more vulnerable to dropout.<sup>4</sup> However, it can be said that while groups of students asking for equal opportunities are generally experiencing financial difficulties – perhaps because they did not receive real assistance in their difficulties after entering higher education – paradoxically, for students who earn extra points for outstanding performance, the reason of learning difficulties is the most common in their dropout.

### **Summary**

In all secondary schools, more emphasis should be placed on career guidance programs. Career guidance programs would be required where a well-trained team of professionals (who are well versed in the offer of higher education, the nature of the training, and the labor market), in collaboration with the classmates and parents, helps students to take their individual interests, goals, abilities, and opportunities into account in their further education decision. Complementing this with a series of lectures where invited speakers (such as instructors, graduate students, senior students, etc.) provide information on individual disciplines, higher education requirements, difficulties and opportunities, merit and social scholarship opportunities, mentoring programs, and expected costs ([Kovács et al., 2019](#)).

It would be advisable to complement the career guidance opportunities by raising awareness of the differences in studying in public education and higher education, and by presenting concrete experiences and learning methods, even if the candidate has proved successful in their public education years (e.g., they have a language exam, or an advanced-level school-leaving exam). In addition to learning methods, it can also help to reconcile work with studies, as well as focus on longer-term financial rewards for a degree ([Kovács et al., 2019](#)).

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### **About the Authors**

DKN is an assistant lecturer in the Benedek Elek Faculty of Pedagogy at the University of Sopron and first-year doctoral student in “Education and Society” Doctoral School of

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<sup>4</sup> According to Ceglédi (2018), in the absence of significance, we investigated the extent of adjusted standardized residuals, the results of which prove to be relevant and useful to our research questions in the exploration of certain hiding correlations.

Education at the University of Pécs. Her main research topic is the history of nursery school teacher training from the middle of the 20th century. She was also involved in study concept and design, statistical analysis, and interpretation of data.

CCs is a research assistant in Center for Higher Education Research and Development Hungary, a PhD student in the Doctoral Program on Educational and Cultural Sciences at the University of Debrecen. Her research focuses on higher education and labor market characteristics of individuals choosing supporting professions. She was also involved in study concept and design, statistical analysis, and interpretation of data.

AH is a research assistant in Center for Higher Education Research and Development Hungary, a PhD student in the Doctoral Program on Educational and Cultural Sciences at the University of Debrecen. Her research focuses on students with disabilities and learning difficulties in higher education as well as their situations in the labor market. She was involved in study concept and design, statistical analysis, interpretation of data, and study supervision.

All authors had full access to all data in the study and take responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

## **Ethics**

The study procedures were carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. The Institutional Review Board of the Institute of Educational and Cultural Sciences (University of Debrecen) approved the study.

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