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Student Self-governance in Hungary in the New Millennium: Advocacy, Organisation, Entrepreneurship in the Higher Education Supermarket

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# *Student Self-governance in Hungary in the New Millennium: Advocacy, Organisation, Entrepreneurship in the Higher Education Supermarket*<sup>\*1</sup>

**Abstract** The research focuses on active personal and community citizenship, political participation, self-organisation by generations and patterns of public and community activity in the interpretive communities of higher education, as well as on new forms of public activity and the development of student organisations in the new millennium. The empirical source of this article is the database resulting from the study “Active Youth in Hungary” (Aktív fiatalok Magyarországon) (2013, N=1300). This article presents the characteristics of the different phases in the life-cycle of higher education students’ unions as organisations (in terms of performance, creativity, risk-taking, administration and integration). The author analyses the institution system of students’ unions, and the underlying causes of shifts in functions and values and their consequences by using a sociology-of-youth approach to higher education’s historical milestones between 2000 and 2013. The reforms introduced in Hungarian higher education in the new millennium, in particular the introduction of the credit system, led to the transformation of the students’ collective interests which caused a shift in values, a decline of advocating function and the loss of the mass base in the students’ union movement.

**KEYWORDS** higher education, students, youth participation, students’ union, student movement



## **Introduction**

A social achievement resulting from the development of European democracies is the widespread application of the principle of subsidiarity. The basic units of democratic institutional

\* This study is dedicated to memory of my friend Gabor Katai (1975–2014).

<sup>1</sup> The expansion of the Hungarian higher education (the emergence of mass higher education) took place at the turn of the millennium when the number of students reached 300 000. From this point, more than 20-30% of the secondary school graduates entered the higher education as freshmen, which clearly corresponds to the definition of mass higher education. The credit system was introduced between 2002 and 2004. These changes turned higher education into a ‘supermarket’ where the ‘shelves’ of syllabus offer a choice of courses in forms of credits that the students could choose and put into their ‘shopping baskets’. However, the actors of the Hungarian higher education were unprepared for these modifications.

systems are self-governments. These specific organisational frameworks of social self-governance are suitable for representing both professional and political interests and values. It is the great interest of both the people concerned and the central authorities to delegate to representatives the task of raising and addressing issues and problems. Self-governance in European higher education has been present since the establishment of the first universities. Autonomy is an important value added to the transhistorical nature of the institution of the university: together with the Roman Catholic Church and the British and Icelandic Parliaments, the University is one of the most durable institutions of human civilisation, as “there are 70 universities among the 85 institutions that have been functioning continuously since 1520” (KERR 1982.152. in BERDAHL 1993. 163.). The autonomy of universities also meant a reasonable task sharing, thus students were involved in addressing student-related issues with an extending scope of activities in different institutional forms: raising students’ problems, developing, accepting and implementing proposed solutions. These responsibilities are carried out most effectively by student representatives who treat the community of students as their own communities (JANCSÁK–MATISCSÁK 2004, SZABÓ–KUCSERA 2006, EKLER 2008, JANCSÁK 2008, SZABÓ 2009, SZABÓ–KUCSERA 2009, JANCSÁK 2011b, JANCSÁK 2014).

In this article we monitor and analyse the evolution of the student union movement from 2000. In this article, the timeline of the development of students’ unions is analysed in the process of Hungary’s accession to the European Higher Education Area: amending the Act on Higher Education in 2003 (introducing the credit system), amending the Act on Higher Education in 2005 (introducing 3-year bachelor’s degrees [BA and BSc] and 2-year master’s degrees [MA and MSc]) and accepting a new Act on Higher Education in 2011 (reducing the proportion of student from 1/3 to 1/4 in main university decision making bodies and university senates<sup>2</sup>). Analysing the responses given by the organisation to societal challenges, we interpret the underlying causes of shifts in functions and values of the students’ union institutional system and their consequences. Interpreting this change through the corporate lifecycle model (Adizes 1992), we try to point out how the institutionalisation of the student movement closed the organisation into a “gilded cage” limiting its innovation potential, and how the introduction of the credit system between 2003 and 2005 and the consequent erosion of collective students’ interests lead to a crisis of values and a decline in advocacy.

The historical span of the article is illustrated by extracts from interviews with leading actors of the student movement, however, we intend to give a more profound insight into the values of the service providers on the “higher-education market” and their relations to public life and advocacy through the analysis of data from the study “Active Youth in Hungary” conducted in 2013 and the thorough examination of the views of students who consider themselves related to the Students’ Union.

<sup>2</sup> Since 1993, Students’ Unions have had a representation of 1/3 in university decision making bodies (University Councils) in Hungary. This high proportion was the result of the period abundant with alternative opposition movements before the change of the communist regime: students supported the regime change with their strike started in Szeged in 1988 that later spread in the whole country and from which the future student union movement developed. Reformers of higher education and the parliament elected in 1990 strengthened this base by codifying a student proportion of 1/3 in university councils and granting a right of veto to students’ unions in determining the different fees to be paid by students. All students enrolled for a certain semester can become members of the Students’ Union, can elect and can be elected to be members of different Students’ Union bodies and committees. The mandates last for one year, elected members receive a scholarship of public activity and are exempt from classes during official events (meetings of bodies and committees).

## Searching for New Directions in the New Millennium

Higher education associations developed in parallel with the higher-education integration process and the Students' Unions of integrated universities and colleges established on 1 January 2000 partly intended to draw on the fundamentals (mass events, platforms, debates, active communication, demonstrations against the tuition fee to be introduced at national level [2005, 2007, 2010]). In service providing, there was a shift towards professionalism and enterprises were created who were active exclusively within universities, in providing services to students (e.g. Műegyetemi Ifjúsági Szolgáltató Kft.<sup>3</sup>, Debreceni Campus Kft.<sup>4</sup>, Universitas-Pécs Kft.<sup>5</sup>, Universitas-Győr Kft.<sup>6</sup>, Universitas-Szeged Szolgáltató Kft.<sup>7</sup>). The economic entities of the national Students' Union were established (HÖOK Kht., Diákbonusz Kht.)<sup>8</sup>. The period that started at the beginning of the new millennium (and still ongoing!) can be characterised by the words "reformation" and "recreation", because it has divided the organisation into a three-part unity and at the same time segmented it further. The first function is *advocacy* using a union-like space of activities. The second function is *administration* manifested in the self-governance and organisational characteristics. The third function is *financial management* operating in a domain of entrepreneurs (enterprises).

The officials of the movement express themselves in these distinct "divisions": some of them represent loudly the (presumed or real) interests of their fellow students, others organise events (festivals, sports competitions) or are active in student services and student enterprises. By obtaining knowledge and connections within these frameworks, collecting cultural capital and building a contact network, they prepare for the serious competition on the labour market. The scene of information exchange and cooperation among these segments (divisions) is the students' union office which the members of the movement fought for and won at the beginning of the 1990s. As far as carrier planning is concerned, today's officials (volunteers and employees), who are active in these different segments, are already oriented towards the domains of politics, economics or financial markets at the very beginning of their admission to the organisational framework of higher education. And they do so with increasing consciousness.



"At the end of the 1990s in the Students' Unions, there was a kind of erosion process, maybe it is still going on, because there had been so many social changes and the structure of the universities and the mentality and world view of students had changed so much that Students' Unions simply lost almost all their political weight. So as a matter of fact, we could say that the services have overgrown us, but on the other hand we could also say that the Students' Unions simply lost these areas, they couldn't handle them any more. And it was the moment when it became quite clear that we have to create service units that are independent from the Students' Unions, but are definitely close to students, that are capable of providing these student services, and that we have to build a tripartite student service area. One part of it is advocacy and the promotion

<sup>3</sup> Ltd of University of Technology and Economics (Budapest)

<sup>4</sup> Ltd of University of Debrecen (Debrecen)

<sup>5</sup> Ltd of University of Pécs (Pécs)

<sup>6</sup> Ltd of Széchenyi University (Győr)

<sup>7</sup> Ltd of University of Szeged (Szeged)

<sup>8</sup> Kht = Non-Profit Ltd

of interests which remains the task of Students' Unions, another part is an administrative role which, we can say, is represented by the Student Service Centre, and there is an organisation providing lifestyle and welfare services, and this is a non-profit company or another entity that is very close to Students' Unions in respect of its organisation and in every other respect as well, but whose financial management is independent from the university. These three large groups can cover all the areas of students' needs during their studies." (Csaba Fekete, former student of the Faculty of Science, University of Szeged, president of the University Students' Union of the University of Szeged [SZTE EHÖK] between 1996 and 1998)

Market and politics made these groups of student elite, but Students' Unions were very heterogeneous. The tripartite structure (advocacy, service and administration) did not only divide the bodies and representatives, but also generated inner conflicts that were handled with the same methods used by "adult" actors of politics (e.g. professional use of the mass media).

*"In 1999, the network of higher education institutions was reformed and this process is known as the higher education integration process by the general public. At that time, during this process, we modified our earlier, so to speak, trade union-like advocacy behaviour that also involved democratic street politics. Since the beginning of the negotiations, there had been a government proposal to practically remove – banish – Students' Unions and possibilities for advocacy from faculty life and institutional councils. We initiated private members' motions for amendment and we turned the whole thing, so we managed finally to keep the rights to representation at faculty level in the integrating higher-education institutions. In all integrated institutions, in university and college councils representational rights were handed down as the strongest Students' Union rights to representation. This had been achieved by HÖOK [National Conference of Students' Unions] using a new technique that was unlike a trade union, street-politics style, "social-mass-appearance" technique. It was rather like the technique characteristic of political lobby organisations in a parliamentary democracy. The same method was used in 2000 when they wanted to take the rights of HÖOK and cut down its financial conditions or transfer it to others. Instead, we practically increased our statutory operational support by one and a half times, and so we also reversed the government proposal. And at that time, we also achieved our goal acting as a political lobby organisation through individual representatives and committee motions of amendment." (Tamás Gergely Kucsera, former student of the Faculty of Arts, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, President of the National Conference of Students' Unions [HÖOK] between 1999 and 2000)*

The twenty-first-century students' life includes less and less problem solving that students explicitly define as advocacy. With the development of the credit system, former study groups were dissolved. With the dissolution of these groups, group interests gave way to individual interests. However, individual interests resulted in diverse carrier plans and individual professional plans, and more or less correspondingly planned and developed study paths. Consequently, classical forms of advocacy disappeared, as individual and atypical problem solving methods started to evolve at the level of needs. Therefore, advocacy nowadays means providing (good and useful) information for students.

*"When we compiled the program for our presidency, one of the central elements, one of the key categories was how Students' Unions should deal with the increased number of students. And the primary problem was not the number of students, but rather the structure: half of the students did*

*not pursue their studies as full-time students. Students spend shorter periods of time in the same institution. In our time, people spent 4, 5 or 6 years at the same place where they started their studies. When they were admitted, in the first year, they became members of the Students' Union and after climbing the career ladder, in the third or fourth year, they became president of the Students' Union. Now, with the Bologna Process, this kind of representative activity might have become more difficult, as the main reason behind the whole thing is the fact that people often do not obtain their master's degrees at the same place where they began their undergraduate-level training, but in a different institution." (Gergely Ekler, former student of the Faculty of Arts, Eötvös Loránd University, President of the National Conference of Students' Unions [HÖOK] between 2005 and 2006)*

The content of activities considered to be similar to trade union activities has changed, and advocacy is not included in them any more, at least not in the sense of the 1980s and 1990s. An increasing number of students need a provider of information. An organisation that can provide information in more and more complex everyday activities of higher education. We intentionally use the expression of service provision, as, with the introduction of credit systems, when study groups – that used to be stable from the beginning to the end of the studies – were dissolved, it is impossible to show a standardized path or beaten track to students, therefore, information can only be collected and provided knowing that everybody takes as much as they can. Since the credit system was introduced, students compiled the elements of their higher-education paths themselves. The freedom provided by the credit system had been unknown to Hungarian higher education, and the lack of collective knowledge and experience that could be provided for both teachers and new students of higher education, causes problems. Today, new inequalities are created and a widening gap is formed based on the quality of information and on the time and speed of the acquisition of useful information. These services operate in more and more places successfully and range from credit counselling, study counselling, career orientation, mental health consoling, teaching learning techniques to recreational or anti-stress techniques, information portals and newsletters. These are the activities that we consider as operational advocacy today.

*"The system of leadership trainings, the establishment of career centres and career trainings, all were done at that time. And it was a really calm period when you had time to focus on that. We had leadership trainings with two or three hundred people. This also meant the strengthening of the core of student self-governance. I think it was a period when we tried to build cohesion. It was encouraged to have personal relations among the leaders of Students' Unions – not only among presidents, but also among vice presidents and members –, it was important to form personal relationships. And another important thing: we tried to position HÖOK as a student association which is not any student association, but a youth association, and not any youth association, but THE youth association." (Kornél Almási, former student of the Budapest University of Technology and Economics, President of the National Conference of Students' Unions [HÖOK] between 2001 and 2002)*

*When I became the President of the National Conference of Students' Unions in 2003, the National Conference of Students' Unions was already a mature, institutionalised and bureaucratized institution. On the one hand, there was a legal guarantee for the operation of HÖOK both financially and organisationally, on the other hand, there was a network of connections in the HÖOK based on the connections built at the time of OFÉSZ (National Higher Education Advocacy Association)*

*that resulted in a professional organisational network of operation. (Zsolt Barthel-Rúza, former student of the Faculty of Arts, Eötvös Loránd University, and President of the National Conference of Students' Unions [HÖÖK] between 2003 and 2004)*

In parallel with the development of higher education policy after the political transition, the students' movement and its newly established organisations of self-governance gained political and economic positions. The students' patterns of political action strengthened the increasingly radical advocacy efforts, then in the new millennium, the market economy developments. This went hand in hand with the increase in student numbers and the penetration of free market conditions into higher education. Besides the mentioned factors, the emergence and the later evolution of the movement, and the representatives' behavioural patterns were also influenced by the change in the value system of the students, and in particular by the new type of public activity of the intelligentsia that was manifested in the decline of innovative thinking and in the preservation and imitation of official positions of authority.

*"I don't know if there is a direct connection between the impact of these structural and organisational changes and the fact that we seemingly have fewer debates in general assemblies and less energy is put into confrontation. I'm not sure if it's so because of the above mentioned facts, maybe it's because the world is changing, students are changing and so is the temperament of student representatives." (Tamás Gergely Kucsera)*

The tripartite structure (advocacy, service and administration) that developed not only divided bodies and representatives, but also generated inner conflicts which catalyzed the necessity for change.

*"I think – although at that time we didn't think so – that, in fact, these conflicts enabled the organisation progress. For example in many respect we already...there were also personal conflicts... but these contributed to the development of the organisation." (Kornél Almási)*

*"There is no other advocacy organisation, no other professional or civil society organisation in this country that would have such an ability to reform itself and that could continuously respond to external challenges in a way that meets the requirements of a changing world." (Tamás Gergely Kucsera)*

Through this defragmentation, the organisation opened new spaces and it became the actor in the arena of youth policy by following the path of political professionalization.

*"HÖÖK cannot be considered only as a student organisation or an organisation dealing with higher education. I think there will be a breakout opportunity for HÖÖK, and it will engage in the representation of students' interests and higher education student issues again, but also it will be able to engage in youth organisation structure again. It is worth examining what the problem is, and the problem is more and more the fact that why the members of the young generation get tired of the things, and why they don't participate in public life. I think these issues must be addressed." (Kornél Almási)*

In this period, Hungarian higher education became part of the European Higher Education Area. Therefore, it has to be noted that unlike in Hungary, in 63 % of the universities in the countries participating in the Bologna Process, students only formally participate in decision-making (participation in the senate or council, or at faculty/department level). (REICHERT-TAUCH 2003). According to a European Union study, half of the students feel that they play a fairly active role in the development of the European Higher Education Area through their national and European organisations; however, further development is needed in a number of areas so as to involve students in different initiatives at institutional and in particular at department level. (REICHERT-TAUCH 2003). Among the actors of the higher education arena, the students were who continuously emphasized the values of student-oriented learning, flexible study paths, the entry into higher education and the planning of study burden based on empirical study when the credit system for the whole institution was developed. The representatives of European students are the most hopeful about the basic principles of the reform, and they primarily criticize their implementation and increasingly limited interpretation; however, they contribute effectively to maintaining professional and political discussion on certain themes (like the social dimension of higher education and higher education as public good) (see JANCSÁK 2011b). Examples in Hungary (e.g. demonstrations based on social arguments) seem to confirm this.

## **New University Youth – New Challenges**

The reason for the changing students' self-governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not only the changing social environment, but also the transformation in the domain of universities. Higher education periods are offered by universities to enrolled students as a type of life style. This transformation entails significant risks deriving from the lack of comprehensive regulation, and the fact that the higher-education arena in Hungary (and its legal background) is very heterogeneous. This period (the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Bologna Process, strengthening the borders of the European Higher Education Area) determines the role of the Students' Union in Hungary (as an element of the European youth/student movement system starting from a different base and taking a different development path) and the importance, the possibilities and the future of institutions for a long term at both national and international levels.

With the increasing importance of the consumer society and the transformation of student life-styles, representation (of interests) has also changed and its domain is not the revolutionary campus any more, but the entrepreneurial campus (KÖZMA 2004. 117–129.). All these tendencies were strengthened by the emergence of a new 'managerism' at the end of the first decade of the new millennium in which the classical academic direction of the university was substituted by a managerial approach. Consequently, decisions are made in a central (narrow and professional) domain that involves neither faculty councils and university councils/senates, nor the body of vice rectors (possessing resources of academic knowledge capital and prestige), but executive and administrative employees, especially in the field of finance, economy, management, strategy, development, tenders and human resource, and a governing body (sometimes appointed by the operator and not elected by university citizens) emerging from these employees (Cf. ESTERMANN-NOKKALA 2009; ESTERMANN-NOKKALA-STEINEL 2011). Thus, certain representatives and leaders of Students' Unions have become members of university management (even before finishing their studies) thanks to their knowledge and contact network.



*“In fact, since 2000, Students’ Unions started to provide services, services for students. We have to add that it already happened in Europe 20 years ago. There, Students’ Unions are huge service centres catering for student life. This is a totally natural development and I’m happy that it has also happened in Hungary. But it entails that movement-like features die out a little. The president of the Students’ Union is a university manager. The meetings of university management look like this: rector, secretary-general, general director for finance, deans and the president of the Students’ Union. He or she is a university manager working non-stop like a full time employee. Unfortunately, the whole organisation (with a few honourable exceptions) gradually adopted this mentality. It became bureaucratic and the movement side disappeared.” (Dávid Nagy, former student at the Faculty of Law, Széchenyi István University, President of the National Conference of Students’ Unions [HÖÖK] between 2011 and 2013)*

As for the power conditions within the institution, it has to be noted that the public (academic) management of a higher education institution (the level of rectors or deans) is in a better position for negotiations against a Students’ Union with limited social legitimacy and a small (or non-existent) group of student supporters, or conformist collaborating student representatives. It also has to be mentioned that certain advocacy roles were rewarded by institutional sanctions on the side of the university’s “adult” society. The following citation illustrates the symbiotic relationship:

*“At the Faculty of Arts, it was an old »tradition« that faculty direction allowed Students’ Union members to do everything until they represented the interests of the dean, but once they turned against the dean, earlier defaults that had been overlooked would be brought up officially and the person would be kicked out of the Faculty. The members of the Students’ Union at the Faculty of Arts are »stupid«, because they always make this same mistake.” (András Döbör, former student of the Faculty of Education, University of Szeged, president of the University Students’ Union of the University of Szeged [SZTE EHÖK] between 2002 and 2003)*

In this case, although students’ representatives have a limited ability to promote student interests, they can still mobilise their forces in concealed personal deals that is manifested in students’ possibility to be present in faculty-level and institutional councils granted in the Act on Higher Education. It was observed that the lack of legitimacy strengthen the earlier mentioned tendency of distinction and separation which enhances the chance that Students’ Union members build their own careers, or instead of representing student interests they intend to promote the direction’s opinions to students. This way, representatives of students’ interests may become sellers in the higher-education supermarket, although fellow students (and also acts and regulations!) require Students’ Unions to play the role of the consumer protection.

As a result of its historical and organisational development, the organisation of the student movement has become an important player not only in the youth policy arena, but also in the civil society sector: besides delegating representatives into regional youth councils (regionális ifjúsági tanács – RIT), and from 2011, participating in the strategic cooperation of the New Generation Programme (Új Nemzedék Program), it also mobilised its support base of civil society organisations successfully during elections and delegations to decision-making and fund-allocating bodies of the National Civil Fund (Nemzeti Civil Alapprogram – NCA) created in the late 1990s and of the National Cooperation Fund (Nemzeti Együttműködés Alap – NEA)

established after the change of government in 2010.

*“HÖOK cannot be considered only as a student organisation or an organisation dealing with higher education.” (Kornél Almási)*

*“I think that with these three significant areas – education, youth affairs and general civil society area –, HÖOK created perspectives that became even stronger in 2003 and 2004, and that may be unique among civil society organisations. There’s no other civil society organisation in Hungary that would have such a huge mass base. And it’s not so important how many students there are in Hungary and how big the supporter base of HÖOK is, but how quickly and how many people it can contact, to how many people it can reach out and steer into another direction in connection with political elections considering that students have families that comprise mostly people of voting age. I think HÖOK became an unavoidable organisation in the fields of education, general civil society affairs and youth affairs.” (Zsolt Barthel-Rúzsza)*

By observing the transformation campus life, we can conclude that universities cannot yet deal with the phenomenon of a flourishing civil society life within the walls of the institution. It seems that they cannot get rid of the concept of “one party, one youth association” remaining from the times before the regime change, a concept that is expected to extend and become extremely heterogeneous in the near future. Students’ everyday activities are intertwined with participating in civil society initiatives independent from the university budget, with using services and visiting events. In our opinion, this tendency will strengthen with the extension of the Hungarian “Civil Society Arena”. Universities have not realised the potential in civil society public life yet. Moreover, civil society actors are inevitable for the creation of a really lively and developing university community. There are already sufficient examples, even if they are undeveloped: the work of civil society organisations is irreplaceable in the field of fund raising, developing community spirit and quality assurance. All these civil society volunteer activities inspire the student movement as well.

In a study conducted on Students’ Unions in 2008, it was discovered that “students’ union officials showed little willingness to answer the questions, we could even say that they were demotivated to participate in the study” (EKLER 2008). In case of the student union movement, this demotivation is a symptom – and here we refer again to the model of Adizes – that the movement still has the competences needed for legitimacy thanks to its developed administration; however, as for creativity, risk-taking and (exactly for these reasons) integration, its resources and potentials are in decline.

*“The kind of bureaucratization that has happened – and it is perfect in peacetime, it is good until Students’ Unions and HÖOK can be invisible – has to be substituted by a little more movement-like style, and this process should be a little accelerated.” (Dávid Nagy)*

As a result of this shift in students’ views, a system of representation needs to be established (recreated and/or created) in the new millennium that focuses primarily on these potentials. On the other hand, in order to develop the system, enhance its competitiveness and maintain it as a role model and a representation of values, it is inevitable to allow new movements to develop that not only point out problems, but also adequately react to them, and to help the student movement to be reformed based on these alternatives.

*“It has to be noted that Students’ Unions have a great deal of institutional responsibilities. [...] If we took and eliminated the Students’ Union, there would be no allocation of scholarships, because the institution has no capacity for that. It’s both a blessing and a curse. [...] The Student Network movement existed already around 2006. Now, current events have strengthened it and this alternative was needed exactly because the HÖOK was slow. [...] Anyway, I consider many of the principles maintained by HAHA<sup>9</sup> identical to those of the HÖOK. So it won’t appear in the future, it has already appeared! But it can also happen at personal level, as I’ve already mentioned. If there is a person among the activists of the Student Network who wants to step on the official path. And I can only support it! (Dávid Nagy)*

Today, change can generate a development in two directions. Either movement spirit will override institutional forms, or advocacy will be reborn in alternative movements without being connected to any institutionalized organisations. However, in the current situation, there is also a chance that students in higher education do not grab the opportunity. The reason for this may lie in individualisation, the phenomenon of retiring into one’s shell as a result of the financial crisis, the crises of altruistic and community values and the evaluation system, the lack of interpretive communities and democratic citizen competence and a democratic deficit among students.

The fact that student self-governance today is at a turning point again is confirmed by the data from the study “Aktív hallgatók 2013” (Active students 2013); however, the more profound patterns of connection to student communities also show that reference groups and interpretive communities (Pusztai 2012) mean communities of peer groups that may be of professional nature, rather than public-life and advocacy organisations. Moreover, we can suppose student activity and community activity based on the information that almost two thirds of students are connected to a loosely organised community and only every tenth student is totally passive as regards community participation.

**TABLE 1** \* *Are you connected to a group? (%)*  
Aktív hallgatók 2013 (Active students 2013)

	Yes
Students’ Union	7.8
HAHA	1.7
Other student organisation	11.2
Other organisation addressing public issues other than parties	5.3

Few students are connected to student advocacy groups (Students’ Union, HAHA). As regards the methodology, we have to mention that in this case “connection” has a broad sense, as it may range, for example, from following the Facebook site of an organisation to submitting applications for social aid in person, but it may also mean recreational activities in the sport

<sup>9</sup> HAHA (Hallgatói Hálózat, Student Network) was established in 2011 and, according to its website, it is “a self-organised Hungarian student movement” which is not identical with the HAHA (Cultural Association of Students’ Unions in the Hajdúság Region) established in 1996. It considers as its antecedent the student group called Student Network established at the Eötvös Loránd University in 2006.

association or club of the organisation, participation in demonstrations or work in a student committee. According to the Act on National Higher Education in force, every student enrolled is member of the Students' Union; however, students interpret this expression in a different way: not all students consider themselves as members of the Students' Union. Based on our interviews, for university students, the expression "member of the students' union" means a representative elected into one of the bodies of the Students' Union (HÖÖK [National Conference of Students' Unions], university/faculty level Students' Union, students' union committee). The survey "Active Youth 2013" interpreted "connection" as social contact (during which there is an exchange of values); however, it raises the consequences of interaction, as the parties generate reactions from each other. For us, the most important is a connection to (any) form of representation. We have to note that the two types of representation under examination are fundamentally different in this respect: the Students' Union is a representation with democratic legitimacy (set out by acts and regulations) exercised through elections, while HAHA (Student Network) its alternative organisation is a group of peers who engage in advocacy (where the source of legitimacy is not granted by law, but rooted in showing interests and values).

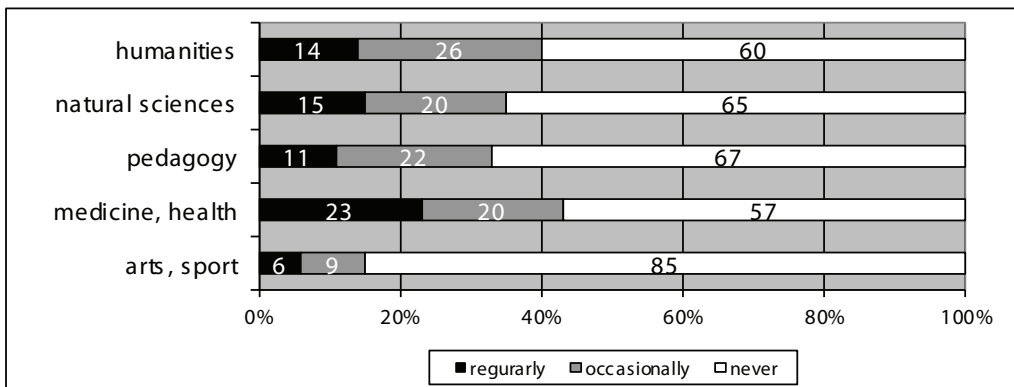
Data from the survey "Active youth 2013" show that few students are connected to the Students' Union (8 %) and even less to HAHA (2 %) the most popular alternative student initiative at the time of data collection. From all this, we drew the conclusion that there is limited contact between students and their fellow students representing them. The proportion of the connection to the Students' Union is the same among students from state universities and colleges and not state-owned (church-owned and private) higher-education institutions. Most connections to representative groups are maintained by students of the humanities, pedagogy, medicine and technology, while most connections to other student organisations are kept by students of economics, law, social sciences and medicine (one fifth of students are a member of such an organisation by areas of study), and students of social sciences maintain the closest connections to other (non-party) organisations addressing public issues. Only full time students answered that they are connected to the Students' Union and HAHA or other student or public-life organisations. (This information can be distorted by the fact that part-time evening and correspondence students are significantly underrepresented in the sample).

We also examined the instances of connections to the student movement with respect to certain canonized resources of capital. There was no pattern of difference in students' closeness to or distance from the Students' Union either by cultural capital (parents' education level) and economic capital (financial situation of the family), or by size of permanent residence locality and gender.

Vivid and active connection can be examined when we analyse the participation in the election of representatives. This election is successful and valid, if more than one quarter of full time students participate in it as set out in the statutory regulation on higher education in force in the period examined in the study. This condition is met by operative Students' Unions.

The data from the survey "Active Students 2013" show a more profound pattern with respect to participation: 85 % of students participating in the election of Students' Union representatives state that they are not connected to the Students' Union, and 97 % of students who have never participated in the election are, not surprisingly, also not connected to the Students' Union (two thirds [746] of the students in the sample belong to the latter group). However, one third of the respondents connected with the Students' Union have never participated in the election of student representatives. 4% of students not participating in the election of the Students' Union stated

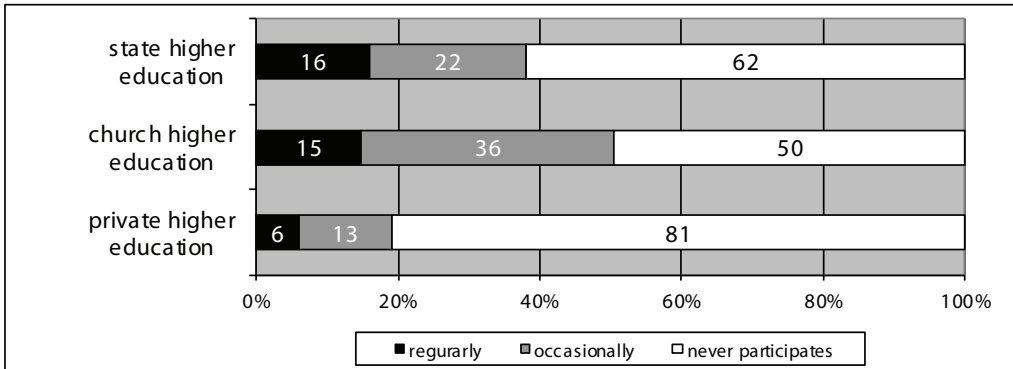
that they are in connection with the Students' Union. The latter two facts raise new research questions considering the low number of elements (26 students) in this set. It has to be noted again that there is a need for further studies on the more profound patterns of Students' Union connections that are – as it can be seen from the above sections of this article – interpreted as an extremely complex network given the diversity of Students' Union activities (higher-education professional policy, individual and group advocacy, service provision, administration, financial management, organisation, operations management). As for the alternative advocacy group HAHA, it was not possible to show significant results in this respect given the small number of elements (21 students connected to HAHA). The democratic value-transfer function of student peer groups is manifested in one of the results of the study indicating that two thirds of students connected to other (e.g. professional) student organisations participate regularly in the Students' Union election. If we examine the participation in the election of representatives according to distribution by areas of study, students of arts and sport are the least active (10 out of 8 students have never participated in the Students' Union elections), and students of medicine and health related subjects are the most active, as one quarter of them participates regularly in the election. This is an outstanding result compared to the proportion of regular voters in other areas of study (10 to 15 %).



**FIGURE 1** \* Do you regularly participate in the election of representatives in the Students' Union?  
Distribution by areas of study, %

More than one third of students from state-owned institutions participate in the election of Students' Union representatives. Distribution by types of institution operators (NEXT CHART) shows a surprising result, as students of church institutions seemed to be more active participants than those of private institutions. The reason behind this difference in activity might be the small number of the elements (among respondents, there were 69 students from church-owned and private higher education institutions respectively, while there were 1112 students from state institutions); however, we can also refer to the effect of social capital on the development of democratic citizen competences, that is the community-building function of church-owned institutions and the valuable role of interpretive communities (PUSZTAI 2011) in enhancing community and public activity (UTASI 2013).

FIGURE 2 ❖ Do you regularly participate in the election of representatives in the Students' Union?  
Distribution by institution operators, %



Almost two thirds of students answered that their interest in societal problems is above the average and the distribution of this interest is independent of whether students characterised themselves with an active connection to the Students' Union or not. Thirty percent of students connected to the Students' Union are interested in politics (42 % of them are not interested), while the same is true for 40 % of students connected to other student organisations (in this latter group, 33 % of them are not interested in politics). One third of the respondents state that they are more than average interested in politics; however, in this respect, there is no significant difference between young people defining themselves as being close to the Students' Union or being distant from it. Three quarters of young people connected to the Students' Union positioned themselves to the middle of the scales "rightist-leftist", "liberal-conservative" and "moderate-radical" based on their political views. These data show similar patterns compared to the distribution of students not connected to the Students' Union; however, in the case of students connected to the Students' Union, there are higher proportions towards the middle of the scales, which means that the proportion of students not connected to the Students' Union are closer towards the two extremes of the scales. For example, as 5 % of students connected to the Students' Union and 9 % of students not connected to the Students' Union defined themselves as rightists, while 2 and 3 % of the latter groups respectively defined themselves as leftists. 5% of students connected to the Students' Union defined themselves as being fully liberal, while for non-connected students, this value is 8 %. 3% of students connected to the Students' Union and 4% of students not connected to the Students' Union are conservative. As for radicalism, 3 % of students connected to the Students' Union marked the highest values on the scale, while the same figure was 4 % for students not connected to the Students' Union. Three quarters of students connected to the Students' Union would definitely go to vote if there were national elections that Sunday. This confirms our statement that the student union movement is a school of democracy.

The data show that two thirds of students connected to the Students' Union have already been in connection with a Students' Union in primary or secondary school (meaning that they were socialized to be active in this field at an earlier life phase), which suggests a relation between democratic participation and citizenship education.

Surprising results were discovered when we examined the connection between virtual communities and student representation: online communities addressing public issues are

not connected to the Students' Union and students connected to the Students' Union are not members of these online communities. Consequently, we can draw two conclusions: firstly, members of informal virtual communities represent a new type of public activity that reflects (and in its framework, deconstructs) the official rigidity of the Students' Union organisation, and secondly, youth initiatives outside the university policy arena of the Students' Unions are uninterpretable for the Students' Union.

We have to note that young people experienced a crisis of values and a general lack of trust at the beginning of the new millennium which concerned also student self-governance; however, the deficit is stronger in case of other institutions.

TABLE 2 ❖ *The proportion of students who think of certain institutions that they do not operate entirely fairly*  
N=500, Transparency International, 2013, %

	Not at all typical	Rather not typical	Total of the two
Business sector	15	35	50
National Government	22	25	47
Public sector	10	27	37
Local government	9	15	24
Police	7	12	19
Students' union in higher-education	6	12	18
Public education	4	11	15
Teachers in higher education	2	7	9
Admission committee in higher education	2	6	8

As of the launching of the Bologna Process, students and Students' Unions representing them (similarly to other members of the European Students' Union) may play a more important role in the development of future values of the new and modern higher education, and even for Hungary; however, it can also be an obstacle to everything, especially, if it fails to play an active and proactive part in problem solving.

Once young people express indispensable needs, they can generate a medium that can organise and influence these processes. If the conscious direction of the Students' Union will be still aimed at legitimacy issues, it can remain a player that is caring for administrative needs, and although it has responsibilities that are crucial for institutions, new potentials, new objectives and in this way a new system will be built by new movements.

## Conclusion

By the late 1980s, the student movement had been only partly acknowledged, but it was undoubtedly influential because of its size, and it could make a difference both at the level of general politics and of university policy.

Student demonstrations in 1989 and 1990 spread all over the country, and in particular the consequent changes in university direction and national government allowed the student movement to outgrow its role as a movement and become an organised unit based on the experience gained in the 1980s. In the political and economic vacuum that had been created, there were obstacles to this process, as a number of social and political groups emerged under the aegis of democracy and civil rights and all of them intended to legitimize the new system. This way, the

catalysing role of the student movement was over, because it followed neither the direction to be a political (party-like) organisation, nor the path to become a trade union.

The institution of the student movement became mature with the acceptance of the Act on Higher Education of 1993. Although this “adulthood” created a statutory framework, it also closed the student organisation into a gilded cage the glittering of which obscured the (radical) mass movement past, while the system of rules made it rigid. By the turn of the millennium, the student movement of Hungary had gained strength and become an important actor in the arena of university policy. The debates about the movement versus advocacy activity, and the professional versus economic path were the sparks that set off the reform processes of the organisation.

In the new millennium, new challenges emerged that transformed the life of Students’ Unions significantly and forced them to go on an ontological quest for a new direction. As for participation in public life, the phenomenon of retiring into one’s shell can be observed among students that can be considered as the result of a democratic deficit in the Hungarian society, on the other hand, new civil society or public interpretive communities appeared that became alternative movement initiatives at the beginning of the current decade.

In sum, we can conclude that the student union movement of Hungary which is unique in its development in Europe, represents a fundamental value for the higher education system, and, with the expansion of higher education in Hungary, a school of public life for Hungarian youth (which supports democracy by non-formal citizenship education) to experience the existence of a lively society based on democratic principles and civil liberties.

In our article we showed how a movement could emerge from the environment of rebellion in Merton’s sense in the late 1980s by rejecting the actual goals and means for ones, and how the atmosphere of innovation expanded with the democratic statutory legitimization from the political transition until the middle of the first decade of the new millennium (goals and frameworks were accepted; however, non-conventional patterns of action became more diverse), which development was followed by storms within the organisation of the student movement.

By the end of the first decade of our century, the downward equilibration had been limited to routinely used means and empty conformism; however, local economic and institutional policy power gained strength. New organisations emerging at the turn of the first decade and at the beginning of the new decade raised new questions and answers to meet new challenges. As a consequence of all these, we interpret the path followed by the student union movement of Hungary (marked by focusing public attention on youth policy, influencing higher-education policy, activities in connection with highlighting the values and interests of young people) as a passage from the periphery to the centre from the 80s through the 90s to the millennium, and a return to the periphery in the new millennium. Further research may answer the question whether new current types of youth activities function as an alternative movement or a catalyst of reforms. \*

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❖ INTERVIEW EXTRACTS IN THE ARTICLE

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