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# *The Contribution of Christian Roma Special College of Szeged to the Effectiveness of Higher Education and Labor Market in a Value Sociology Approach*



## *Abstract*

In 2013, we started a research program among the students of Christian Roma Special College of Szeged (SZKRSZ). During our research we made interviews with final year students in autumn 2014 and spring 2015. The focus of our value sociology approach is how alumni of the Christian Roma College of Szeged interpreted the processes of value establishment and also what deeper patterns are outlined from the perspective of special college to higher education's effectiveness and to finding a place in the labour market.

KEYWORDS higher education, students, special college

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## Introduction

In studies that follow the career path of graduates the researchers use economic-labour market parameters (HRUBOS 2008, 2012), yet never or rarely focus on higher education communities (PUSZTAI 2012, 2014), or community contacts (FÓNAI 2015; UTASI 2013), although all these impact higher education achievements (PUSZTAI 2011, 2015a; BOCSI 2015a, 2015b).

Previous studies carry little information about non-standardised higher education content and new institutional roles (consulting, mentoring, life-coaching) or their impact. New higher education content to be examined are: educational issues of micro-climate (KOZMA 2004; HRUBOS 2009; FÓNAI 2015), teacher-student relationship (PUSZTAI 2015b; BOCSI 2015b), non-traditional students (with disabilities, minorities) (PUSZTAI 2011; TRENDL 2012; FORRAI 2014, 2015). Non-educational actors (research groups, groups focusing on tradition preservation, professional circles and special colleges) in higher education scenarios may help us to get more significant information about the above mentioned topics (PUSZTAI 2011, 2015a; KARDOS 2013; CEGLEDI – FÓNAI – GYÓRBÍRÓ 2012), as well as about the value added to higher education content (example.g. in preparation for intellectual roles or contribution to success in labour market).

Within the framework of our study we consider Roma students as non-traditional students, because they belong to a group of students of cumulatively disadvantageous background from economic, cultural and relational capital points of view. In case of non-traditional university students we can talk about equal opportunities, if the importance of origin decreases as we go higher on the qualification scale (ALWIN–THORTON 1984). In student groups like this peer groups (GÁBOR 2004; JANCÁSÁK 2013), relationship networks (PUSZTAI 2015a), and support organisations (KARDOS 2013; CEGLEDI 2015) gain further significance.

In 2013, we started a research program among the students of Christian Roma Special College of Szeged (SZKRSZ), with the aim to familiarize ourselves better with the life in the special college, especially with regards to the contribution of the institution to the alumni's success in higher education and in the labour market.

“So keres akanak” – is the Lovari Gypsy sentence which inspired the title of our book. “*What are you doing now? What are you doing? What is happening now? So keres, SzoKeReSz?*” These and similar questions fulfilled our everyday lives when in 2012 we decided to study the first years of Christian Roma Special College of Szeged (SZKRSZ), which was then in its initial phase, with visions and plans formed only on a theoretical level.

Our aim was to familiarise ourselves more deeply with the world of students members of the college and at the same time study what added values the institution contributes to the path in higher education and later in the labour market.

Apart from SZKRSZ there are six other special colleges at the University of Szeged: the Eötvös Loránd Szakkollégium established in 1956 and of great tradition, the Móra Ferenc Szakkollégium in Újszeged founded in the sixties and functioning as a special college since 2013, the Sík Sándor Piarista Egyetemi Szakkollégium started in 1993, the Karolina Katolikus Egyetemi Szakkollégium established in the new millennium, and the Szegedi Társadalomtudományi Szakkollégium founded by the students in 1998, as well as the Művészetközvetítő és művészetpedagógiai Szakkollégium started in 2013. The first four special colleges also function as dormitories; the last two are not physically bound to a dorm.

SZKRSZ had 16 people when it started, now there are 15. Almost two thirds of the students of SZKRSZ declare themselves having a Gypsy/Roma origin. Since autumn 2015 they have in-

troduced the concept of “external students”, they do not live in the building at Indóház square, but in other university dorms or rented flats, but they have the same rights and obligations as the internal special college students.

SZKRSZ is a member of Christian Roma Special College Network (KRSZH) founded in 2011. KRSZH was established by four institutions (Jesuit Roma Special College, Hungarian Evangelist Church Roma Special College, Miskolc Greek Catholic Gypsy Special College, Wáli István Reformed Gypsy Special College) and the institution in Szeged joined as the fifth member. The number of students in special colleges varies from 15 to 50.

The controlling authority of the Special College in Szeged is the Roman Catholic Diocese of Szeged–Csanád. The college puts an emphasis on Christian values, as highlighted in the name of the college, but students of different religions have of course the possibility to practice their own religion.

The Special College in Szeged has a democratically student council elected by the students, which formulates proposals in accordance with the powers and opinions and also participates in the daily life of the institution and in shaping content for the special college.

One of the main aims of the college is customised development, so they provide students with a mentor, a tutor and/or peer support service. This approach leads to the fact that the college pays great attention to the students’ individual development plan (IDP) - to its content, planning and implementation processes. Students are supported in achieving their goals by their mentors (university/college lecturers).

The special college’s academic program consists of modules: the cultural model consists of courses which develop a dual (Roma and Hungarian) identity; the spiritual module aims to deepen the Christian values; a general education module strives to provide input which shall prepare the students of the special college for the intellectual life.

Community involvement and volunteer service are important parts of the SZKRSZ’s “educational program”. Students volunteer ten hours per semester in partner institutions, e.g. Roma study halls, retirement homes and charity, but this includes a request for information and sensitizing work carried out in secondary schools, which occasionally disseminates the world of higher education and special college life. More than one student of SZKRSZ came to know the institution on an information day like this.

The personal and social development of the most important content added values of the SZKRSZ, but let us not forget the university (state) and other (funds, NGOs) scholarships and grants which complement special college scholarships and which the students receive either by being nuanced along several components or they receive them in a differentiated manner, according to levels. Newly admitted college students receive forty thousand forints per month, the others, based on their achievement, up to even fifty thousand forints per month according to the following: they get points based on a five-grade scale for contents in a given semester (implementation of IDP, proactive approach in special college’s courses, study weekends, cultural events) and based on the ranking they shall be categorised into a certain grant group.

## **Methodology**

The focus of the study therefore is whether (1) the life in a special college contributes and (2) how to the welfare of its students beyond the subject matter acquired in higher education.

Based on our studies in higher education and the relevant literature as well as through familiarising ourselves with SZKRSZ’s “educational program” – as a result of professional in-

interviews with the director of the college (2013, 2014) – our initial assumption was that (3) the special college manages to implement an extended social expectation towards higher education and therefore to decrease vulnerability in the labour market. We also assumed that during the formation of a (4a) special college community consisting of Roma and non-Roma youth (4b) and via implementing an educational program, as a result of a planned and conscious personality development, a unique re-socialisation process is created and that this will be positively evaluated by the students from the special college.

In the qualitative phase of the first wave of our study we conducted interviews in autumn 2014 and spring 2015 with altogether 6 members of the special college. During the interviews we were interested in their opinion on the added value of higher education and the special college, as well as what they thought useful competencies are in the labour market. In the focus of our attention in this part of our research was how the graduates interpreted the value-creating processes present in the special college and also whether deeper patterns can be discovered from the point of view of the special college's contribution to the effectiveness of higher education as well as to achievement in the labour market. The questions of the interview focused on the following: How and to what extent did the membership in a special college improve your ability to cooperate in a community? How and to what extent did the special college increase the level of education through trainings and mentoring? How and how much did the special college contribute to strengthening and deepening your identity? How did the special college contribute to success in higher education? How does higher education contribute to success in the labour market? How does a special college contribute to achievements in the labour market? During the qualitative research we have conducted structured interviews with graduates from the special college, twice (in autumn 2014 and summer 2015), when we interviewed students who have finished their studies in the previous semester. Out of seven alumni one did not accept the invitation to take part in the interview and with others we recorded a personal 60-90 minute-long interview, which we analysed in the context of special college contents' contribution to effectiveness in higher education, complementation of higher education and added values.

## **Values of the special college and life in a special college added to the higher education and life period spent in higher education**

### ***Special college and higher education***

With regards to higher education content, the alumni and students of SZKRSZ believe that it is the so-called expanded role expectations compliance, especially the professionally and personally supporting roles of the higher education teachers in which they are engaged beyond their teaching roles, to be the primary explanation for the effectiveness of one's studies.

*“It is a great support, both the professional knowledge acquired during the university courses, both the experience acquired during all the practice. My experience so far shows that the teachers in this institution motivate the students to immerse themselves into their studies as much as possible, and they are glad to help even in scientific work, what is more, they are glad to be able to get the students involved in their own scientific work.” (graduate kindergarten teacher, currently studying physical education and history)*

For students arriving from cumulatively disadvantaged social spaces and low socio-economic status, the positive supporting environment is a basic empowering factor. One of the first members of the special college, a once social worker major, talked about how important it was for him that during their university studies, in a higher education course, he was able to merge information about the special college and through that his identity, both of which factors represented positive feedback for him.

*“I moved into the college and I was told I have to give a presentation about the topic of me living here. And I tried to figure out which course would be the best for this topic... I talked to the teacher and she was pleased. I stood in front of the others and told them what the special college is about and that I live there. I told my story and after that they asked me why I lived there. So I told them I am a half Gypsy, and that they could say what they want and even spit in my face, I don't care since I had my fair share of stereotypes. But no. They asked a lot of questions, even my classmate who I knew was especially biased. He asked questions which made me feel happy because one could tell he was really interested. We really paid attention to each other, and our teacher noticed immediately if something was wrong, since there were obviously some sensitive topics which we touched upon in classes, some people started crying, some left, but then we did not just wait for them to come back, we would go after them and talk to them.” (social worker)*

Our interviewees emphasised the role model role of the teachers and their appearance in value transfer processes of the higher education's intellectual life patterns. This factor was high up in their assessment, as a value especially important for success in the labour market and as a value above professional knowledge.

*“In my opinion, it is especially these added values that make a graduate more, because if the school acknowledges activities beyond the scientific life, the student will be motivated to take part in these extra-curricular programs. I believe these contribute to success in the labour market because in my opinion intellectual existence does not only mean mastering our own professional field of expertise. The more diverse a personality is, the better they can be in their work.” (graduate kindergarten teacher, currently studying physical education and history)*

At the same time it is an important factor among students coming from families with poor economic resources that there is a certain material security attached to the life in the special college, which enables the students to focus on their studies, and the planned income motivates them not to look for occasional or student work, but to ensure economic resources based on their academic-professional results. These successes in higher education do not only make sense from an economic point of view, but also in the form of positive feedback. (There were many interviewees who, apart from the special college grant, mentioned other competition results, grants, e.g. winning the scholarship of the Republic.)

*“I always worked while I was at the university, I worked night shifts in factories, and other things, to me the special college brought salvation, I got in, I received a grant, and I managed to get into a bunch of conferences and take part in numerous trainings, which of course was all time, but not more time than what I previously spent working. It was like a workplace*

*to me, but not a monotonous job in a factory, but a rather interesting course. It was a very positive experience, I enjoyed it very much. (social worker)*

*“Almost all members of the special college come from a disadvantageous or cumulatively disadvantageous background (including myself), and their families would not have been able to finance their higher education studies. For many of them the college grant is a matter of existence, because if they do not get it, they are not able neither to start it, nor to finish their higher education studies.” (graduate kindergarten teacher, currently studying physical education and history)*

The internal educational program of the special college includes service to the community, spiritual module and getting to know the Roma culture. The implementation of individual development plans in each semester rests on the pro-active approach of the individual. Community service includes at least 10 hours of work (e.g. assistance in the Roma Tanoda (Roma study hall), teaching youth, distribute food to the homeless, etc.) The role of the spiritual module is in transferring Christian values. Within this framework they participate in a film club, in cooperation with the Franciscan community of Szeged, and in the other part they participate in a program organised by themselves (there were some who talked about taking part in a rotate mass). One of the accentuated elements of the college's world is organising cultural events, visiting them, as well as community formation and community development. The essence of community formation is to enforce synergy within the college, and to enforce efficient communication, assertive protection of interests, the sense of belonging together. The students also partake in organising activities.

All our interviewees defined these extracurricular elements as added values which to a large extent contribute to the development of personality.

*“For certain students the college program provides opportunities which may be the foundation for their intellectual existence. Many students would not have been able to go to a theatre or take part in excursions, etc. To summarise, I believe the college's educational system (spiritual, civic, cultural), which can be categorised into three groups, facilitates integration into the labour market, since it forms diverse, experienced and self-confident personalities (graduate kindergarten teacher, currently studying physical education and history)*

During our research we have concluded that the students consider community as the major factor enforcing identity and shaping personality, and a factor that pervades all parts of the special college, its microclimate, its unique subculture, its manifested documents and implicit educational program. At the same time, we may be torn by doubt when, as a result of the individualisation process we experience that the feeling of being immersed in the community and the values of altruism are in contrast with the effects and crises of the consumer society. According to the special college alumni, the values of the special college and everyday life together bear great impact on personality development.

*“We all took a risk; we didn't know how living together would work out, or what would come out of this whole thing, since there was no precedent, which would have given us some guidance. In a way, I was a first generation student in the special college, and it probably contributed to*

*an experience where I had to learn what it is like to be in a minority in a community where we are living together, but when I go out on the street, the other party is in the minority. How we can deal with this situation. And also other people's habits, and how we agreed on what to do on the weekends, because we spent a lot of time together even on the weekends, how people formed the groups to be together for the weekend. I believe the first one is an opportunity, or a chance. I can't formulate it better. And there is also another one, which is educational by all means, and this is accepting living together. Establishing professionalism, so that everybody does what they do in the best possible manner.” (law student)*

### **Special college courses and mentoring**

The college pays special attention to the students' studies. Each student has a peer assistant or a mentor. Their task is to help the special college student in achieving their individual development plan, but also to take part as a supporter in solving the student's problems. The special college sometimes gets help from further external teachers. The institution motivates and supports the completion of scientific work; consequently there were teachers who got involved in the scientific research in their area of expertise.

*“I consider mentoring to be important because I am able to discuss my problems with an outsider, whom I can ask for advice, except for academically related questions, since she is an English and Biology teacher. But it is good to talk to her anyway, because she is competent in the topics of college programs, internal training, social integration, conflict management, I can basically ask for her help in any topic and get a relevant answer. The place of mentoring changes, depending on where we have things to do and depending on the aim. In winter we drank tee in the main street. Mentoring takes place once a week and lasts for an hour, hour and a half. If I have a problem, I can talk about it with the mentor and I get a certain solution to my problem, this is how talking to a neutral person helps. And sometimes I get solutions to my other problems, which I may have not even realised. I owe it to my mentor to have been able to reconcile with my roommates.” (mathematics BSc)*

*“Maybe the most important thing, which enables my professional career, is the mentor program. I am grateful and lucky to have been able to get a mentor who is able to help me both mentally and professionally. During mentor meetings, which are an hour once a week, the many times mentioned individual development plan is designed and it is at the meetings that the elements of the plan are checked. Apart from this there is time to talk about school and private life issues, or even professional consultation. Thanks to my mentor I have gained a broader perspective of religious education. At our meetings my mentor always shows me with a little professional trick of the trade which I shall be able to use when I teach, and tells me what to pay attention to.” (catechist, theologist)*

### **Community, activities within the community**

Life in the special college, beyond the courses, mentoring and tutoring primarily refers to living in a community of people, which community is formed along the lines of daily routine and lifestyle, this lifestyle however is not only enriched based on social and small community values, but living together also forms, enriches and develops the personality. Based on the analysis of the interviews, the special college alumni consider this re-socialisation phenomenon, i.e. informal

learning in a community, sensitisation to tolerance, acceptance, cooperation, solidarity, altruism to be one of the major characteristics of SZKRSZ.

*“On the day I moved in I became part of a community where they have not known me beforehand, they did not know what I am like. I experiences this period as the first step towards independence. I got out of an environment where I was protected. I become part of a new community, where I could live together with other who are also of Roma identity, but with a different family background or from a different environment. We can learn from each other, share our thoughts with each other, help our non-Roma friends who are open and interested in us, to enable them to understand our culture. The aim of the special college is to educate responsible intellectuals – either Roma, or non-Roma – who are able to form themselves and their environment and also able to participate in a dialogue.” (catechist, theologist)*

The special college students did not only emphasise community forming and community development as important values, but have expressed positive opinions about the community forming role as a part of the formal tasks of life in a college, i.e. as an element of planned and conscious personality development, is also part of the educational program- Its development, formation and implementation however is based on the individual’s pro-active approach.

It is an overt aim of the institution to get the special college students be participants of the society in a role model and value transfer manner. “For this we need intellectuals of strong identity, stable value system, and capable of dialogue, who can provide a healthy vision of future for the local communities” – said the director during our interview in 2013. Our special college student interviewees reacted to the above by reflecting on events and programs in which value statements are a certain mission.

*“You have to want this very much. I have metaphors for it, too. I always tell them that this is something really great, since I have given many lectures in the college, we visited vocational students, too, I don’t look down upon them, my best friend was a blue collar worker. I have Adidas or Converse shoes on, but only because they were on sale, and I buy them, since I wasn’t able to have them when I was a child. This is a huge thing for me, that there is a girl in shoes like this. A student comes up to me and asks how I can afford it. I say: I bought it from the grant money. Because I go to university. I study well and I get a grant. And they eyes lit up, that you can get money for studying! I tell this to my kids at home. I always tell them to go to high school after primary school. There you will realise you don’t get maths, but you are good at history, or the other way round. But I keep telling them this in vain, their teachers say something else. So I turned it around. I talked to a PE teacher at home, there are so many talented children here and I cannot do anything about it. Currently 10 children receive a grant, because I told the PE teacher there is a grant for this.” (social worker)*

*“I have never been a part of an environment like this. I had great expectations, but I have not regretted a single thing during my time spent here, I learnt many new things, and will learn some more, too, and my personal development is on the rise, too. I look at people differently now, it is not contempt I feel anymore, instead I think about it, if I weren’t born as a Hungarian, but as a Roma, same things would happen to me, too. My standpoint shifted. But I have to thank for this to my roommates and my mentor, too. Although my friends and family have*



*a different opinion about the Gypsies, I believe it is my responsibility to educate them or at least try to show them that what they think is not true.” (mathematics BSc)*

## Our conclusions

The Christian Roma Special College of Szeged is an institution with a special group of tasks, and is a new participant in the higher education of Szeged. During the first phase of our research, between 2012 and 2015, we have followed the birth of the college through a holistic perspective. In our study we used quantitative, statistic data collection and analysis, as well as personal and focus group interviews based on qualitative methodologies. Our research (partly) studies labour market input and as such characteristically produces results serving the congruence of higher education and labour market (e.g. about the contents missing from the world of higher education and about their added value outside the institution but present in the effect), and its analysis can be interpreted within the framework of educational sociology, at the same time, in its approach it is far closer to pedagogical sociology and in the focus of its attention are value transfer processes and their effect.

The transformation of higher education in the new millennium affected non-traditional higher education students with a new vulnerability, namely the individualisation of the post-modern society and the credit system together (joined by the disintegration of study circles) led to a lack of university social relationships, which has created a doubly disadvantageous situation for the youth on the “shady side”: the lack of invigorating relationships and due to that, the lack of access to useful information. Our study shows that the feeling of loneliness is present even among special college students and that it is paired with a “it-is-not-worth-making-an-effort-since-I-won’t-achieve-it-anyway” sentiment. This feedback from students makes an argument for mental health support as a necessity. Our interviewees provided feedback on the importance of mentors in their response to this question.

According to the college members’ feedback, the most important value is the community, the cooperative patterns and practices, which they considered to be the determining factor for academic achievement, similarly to the materialistic elements of the college (housing conditions, an environment supporting learning). The everyday life in the college is not characterised by scientific work, which is due to the wide variety of interests on the students’ part, but this diversity is a resilience and identity strengthens when we talk about community and living together.

During the analysis of values we have established that there is a sense of strong trans-historical value in the special college students’ post-materialistic universal value orientation and value judgment. These value judgments match those of the college’s.

At the same time, when analysing the interviews, we have established that these values are also present in the students’ everyday practice. Value creation and value assignment is therefore present not only in the college’s manifest functions (director’s interview, official documents, leaflets), but also in the students’ implicit value judgment and value orientation. It is therefore present in the college’s everyday life.

After closing the first wave of our research, we can reinforce our initial statement according to which the life and existence in the SZKRSZ special college contributes to youth successes and achievements.

The special college implements certain elements of extended social role expectations mani-

festing towards higher education in the area of labour market vulnerability (equal opportunities, community building, strengthening identity, talent management).

During the formation of the special college community involving Roma and non-Roma youth and via the implementation of the pedagogical program, as a result of planned and conscious personality development a unique re-socialisation process is created. The pedagogy of this process is based on non-formal and mostly informal methodologies. This added value is interiorised by the special college students in a sensitive manner and the alumni provide feedback on it, assess it positively, as a factor contributing to their achievement in the labour market. \*

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