

Report to the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to education, Ms. Farida Shaheed on some of the problems in Hungarian higher education¹

A. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy

Since 2010, government policy on higher education and scientific research has been characterised by a general mistrust towards public universities and research institutes (then still part of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences). The government's criticisms were based on two key points: the perceived lack of effectiveness in meeting labour market and production needs, and the alleged left-liberal ideological influence on these institutions. In what follows, we confine ourselves to universities; although research institutes should be subjects to academic freedom on the same way, and their situation parallels that of the universities in many respects, their status must be analysed by their fellows.

The government decided for a radical transformation of the academic sector using brute force. The aim of the transformation was not the modernisation of the structure which was partly necessary but to destroy any form of autonomy and gain full control over the institutions. They have not even listened to the views of representatives of the sector. Advisory boards and other intermediary organisations where the representants of the government and the academic world discussed the problems and demands of both sides in order to prepare the necessary measures have disappeared or have become insignificant. The Hungarian Accreditation Committee, which had been an autonomous quality assurance body for universities, has come under full government control and lost much of its importance.

The government has a three-pronged strategy to address these perceived problems:

1. some specific actions against institutions or individuals, often accompanied by harsh attacks in the government-influenced press;
2. the creation of new parallel institutions that can operate on much better financial conditions than the earlier ones, and disproportionate support for institutions that are considered trustworthy, especially church institutions;
3. the take-over of power in every single institution and in the whole system of public universities.

Some examples of how these strategies are implemented:

Ad 1.:

- Accusing "liberal" philosophers of misusing research funds, in a press campaign and a prosecutor's investigation - none of the accusations were proven;
- Making it impossible for Central European University to operate in Hungary, with case-by-case legislation;

¹ Prepared by members of the Hungarian Network of Academics (OHA).

- Removal of gender studies and other specialities from the list of degrees that can be awarded in Hungary.

Ad 2.:

- The National University of Public Service (NKE), newly created from several former institutions, has gained a monopoly on education in a number of areas, including some branches of law studies and, more recently, the postgraduate training of teachers.
- It also launches, without any professional precedent, a new kind of teacher training, more in line with government ideology, for which the government will take subsidised student places away from other teacher training institutions, especially the most respected ones.
- The NKE has also been exempted from the control of the Hungarian Accreditation Committee in several respects.
- The universities of the Catholic and Reformed Churches are benefiting from huge state-funded property investments, while the infrastructure of the remaining public universities is on the verge of collapse.

Ad 3.:

After a series of moves to reduce university autonomy, the first major attempt to take over the power within public universities was the appointment of chancellors in 2014. The chancellor is the university's parallel leader of the same rank as the rector, his scope of authority includes the operation of the university as a whole. He is subject to the relevant minister, and he is not responsible to the leading bodies of the university.

However, as the government was not satisfied with the level of control guaranteed by the chancellor system, the process of so-called model change began in 2019. The public universities were changed into foundation universities. The process has involved 22 universities in three stages; with only two large universities in Budapest and two small art universities remaining public at the moment, apart from the NKE.

In the first stage, this change was implemented by changing the National Law on Higher Education, without any consultation with the universities. At the University of Theatre and Film Arts, the reorganisation and the persons nominated to the board by the government provoked strong resistance – the students occupied the university for weeks. The conflict ended with most of the students and professors leaving the university and continuing their work as an association while in the university buildings, under the original logo, a totally different institution operates, led by individuals loyal to the government.

In the next stages, the transformation was formally initiated by the university senates. When they decided in favour of it, they did not know who the members of the boards would be, and even less what regulations the boards would create, but they were promised that for universities accepting the change, the meagre state funding would increase significantly. The senates accepted this, with only a few institutions having a minority of senate members who opposed it.

- From a legal point of view, this process is privatisation, with consequences such as the predominance of business considerations in university strategy.
- But they are still funded by the public purse as before (although the use of public money has become much less transparent).
- From the political point of view, members of the boards were nominated by the government, without the opinion of the universities or any other form of public control.
- The boards' powers are unprecedentedly broad by international standards, covering a range of issues which, according to common practice, should be part of university autonomy.
- In the event of a vacancy on the board, the members of the board will elect a new member, without any fixed criteria and without the participation of the university. Thus, the current government and its political-ideological circle's influence over university leadership will become hereditary even in the event of a possible change in government –despite the fact that the boards are formally independent of the government.
- The academic staff members of these universities were deprived of their status of public servants and they are now in a vulnerable position in terms of labour law.
- The EU Council has suspended these universities' access to EU funding for scientific research and student, professor and staff mobility, citing the lack of transparency and accountability in the bodies that decide how the money is spent.
- Funding for scientific research in Hungary has become strongly centralised, serving government preferences. The system discourages research in social sciences and humanities and creates a difficult situation for younger generations of scientists.

The government policy outlined above is primarily directed against institutional autonomy, but it has indirect consequences for academic freedom. First, university autonomy is the most important guarantee and necessary precondition for academic freedom. Secondly, the growing dependence of academics and researchers leads to fear and self-censorship. Thirdly, actions against individuals, such as the campaign against philosophers mentioned above, or the sacking of an academic for refusing to favour the child of an influential businessman in an exam, are excellent ways of reinforcing such feelings.

B. Accessibility and equity in higher education

This question should be examined in the context of the government's general admission policy which leaves little room for universities. Before the regime change in 1989-90, participation in higher education was extremely low in Hungary. At most, 10% of age cohorts reaching 18 attended higher education, resulting in a low proportion of degree holders among the adult population. After the regime change, the situation quickly changed and the 2000s saw a radical expansion of higher education. But this was only enough to prevent the gap in the proportion of degree holders from widening further. Despite this, by the end of the decade, the expansion slowed down.

Since coming to power in 2010, the politicians of the current government communicated that young people should choose vocational training instead of university, as a good professional qualification is worth more than a degree – although both international comparisons and labour market signals indicate that Hungarian higher education produces too few graduates and not too many. Over the past 15 years, the main direction of higher education policy has remained the steering younger generations from universities toward vocational training, although surprising and ad hoc changes have occurred in regulation (see below). This trend has been implemented through a series of measures of varying intensity and effectiveness. This policy has had a number of consequences and „side-effects” on the academic world and to Hungarian society, one of which is that higher education ceased to be a channel for social mobility.

- In 2012, Viktor Orbán announced the concept of self-sustaining higher education. That would have meant that every students had to cover all the costs of their studies with the support of a student loan system, except for a few government-designated programs where state grants would be provided.
- The announcement triggered a massive wave of protest as a result of which the proposal was partially withdrawn. In the majority of higher education, students obtaining their first degree could still do not have to pay tuition fees. However, the government has selected 16 programmes where (with minimal exceptions) only full cost studies were allowed, as originally envisaged. These programmes covered around 25% of higher education and included key areas such as law and business studies.
- In the following year, the proportion of applicants to higher education significantly decreased. Although this loss was partly recovered in the following years, the gross enrolment ratio in higher education decreased from 62% (which was roughly equal to the European Union average) to 51% between 2008 and 2016 (which by then was 20% below the European Union average). During the same period, the proportion of disadvantaged and multiply disadvantaged students in higher education decreased from 10% to 2%.
- Until 2020, the indicators of participation in higher education stagnated or slightly increased. But in 2020, the government introduced new, stricter general criteria for enrolment in higher education which were mandatory for every institution regardless of their profile or social background. As a result of these measures, the number of applicants in 2020 decreased by more than 20 %.
- In 2023 and 2024, the higher education admission system was heavily decentralized and liberalized – institutions were given significant freedom to determine their admission criteria. Despite the rather confusing and insufficiently guiding new system, the number of applicants increased again. In addition, the – not public – contracts regarding the funding of foundation-run universities strongly incentivize them to admit a large number of students and to prevent their dropout.
This change could represent a step toward a more accessible higher education. However, at the same time, the proportion of the young adult generation which

has a chance to be admitted in higher education is decreasing. In Hungary, there are three types of secondary schools:

- Gimnázium (Grammar Schools): Students obtain a qualification that enables them to enrol in any BA/BSc program in higher education.
- Technikum (Technical Schools): Alongside moderate general education, students receive vocational training. The qualification obtained in these institutions enables students to pursue higher education studies related to their vocational training.
- Szakközépiskola (Vocational Secondary Schools): The weak general education provided in these schools is insufficient—both formally and in terms of content—for pursuing higher education studies.

One of the declared goals of the government's public education policy is to reduce the proportion of students attending grammar schools. It is becoming increasingly difficult to get into grammar schools year by year, and the chances of students from socially, culturally or geographically disadvantaged background are decreasing.

- In the 2025 admission process, the government recently reduced the number of state-funded places in several programs both at public and foundation universities. This mainly affects humanities and social sciences as well as law and business study programs. The measure effects the statements made in 2012, which claimed that the number of degrees awarded in these fields was too high. No facts and investigations support such statements. It seems that the government, on the one hand, suppresses humanities and social sciences representing critical thinking, and on the other hand, hopes that the places at law and business studies will be filled up by tuition-paying students.

Despite the many changes in higher education admission policy, certain preferences seem to remain constant, like the prioritization of STEM and teacher training programs. However, statistics suggest that the government has not been particularly successful in enforcing these preferences. Its approach to the challenge of mass higher education appears to be ambiguous and inconsistent. The real outcome of this policy is a decline in social mobility, as well as the deterioration of conditions in non-preferred fields.

Many events and aspects have been left out from this short summary. A more detailed description and analysis of the events can be found in the higher education chapters of the two volumes of our watchdog report: *Hungary Turns its Back on Europe* [1](#), [2](#). The Hungarian Network of Academics is ready to answer questions and give further information at an eventual personal meeting with the UN Special Rapporteur.