

Research In-Progress: A Narrative Inquiry into the Work Lives of Hungarian University Faculty and Their Perceptions of Higher Education Reform

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Introduction

With a history that spans centuries, Hungary's top higher education institutions have been recognized for their scholastic endeavors and international collaborations. Hungarian campuses are hubs for innovative thinking and have nurtured newcomers and Nobel Laureates alike. Though Hungary is a member of the European Higher Education Area and its top public universities engage faculty who are global leaders in research and innovation, the increasingly authoritarian Hungarian government is waging a war on public education, which threatens academic freedom throughout the region and the professional lives of those who work for higher education institutions (Jewell, 2017; Reisberg, 2017). In a recent World Bank report, since 1999, the amount of spending on public education in Hungary has atrophied relative to economic output (The World Bank, 2017). This, according to *Bloomberg's* Leonid Bershidsky (2017), is in keeping with authoritarian regimes around the world—Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, to name just a few, all who share the same philosophy of spending less on education in an effort to stall or purge political dissent.

Internationalization in Hungarian higher education institutions is not systematic, though in the nearly fifteen years since Hungary's adoption of the Bologna guidelines, early internationalization strategies proved successful (Rozsnyai 2008) in that they encouraged student and faculty mobility, international partnerships, and collaborative research projects. Unfortunately, as the Hungarian government increased barriers to public education, a campaign that has run concurrent with its increased stranglehold on freedoms fundamental to developed Western countries (press, speech, assembly, etc.), barriers to internationalization have also been erected (Pusztai & Szabó 2008; Hockenos 2013; Muller 2017).

Despite standing at the intersection of pressing international and comparative higher education issues, qualitative research into Hungarian higher education, and especially the faculty at its helm, is surprisingly sparse, especially those studies that consider the

influence of political factors. A focus on faculty will allow the researcher to observe ways in which these individuals navigate the complexities of internationalization agendas in Hungarian higher education institutions, as well as pursue an understanding of how education reform (or anti-reform) affects their professional lives. Driven by the desire to document vital narratives, the researcher will travel to Hungary this spring to study faculty lives at one of the nation's best universities. The purpose of the research is to understand the internal and external forces that affect the professional lives of current and past university faculty members. The concept of "forces" is broadly interpreted, though the researcher has defined them as the pedagogical, political, sociological, economic, and philosophical stressors that push faculty members into certain decisions about curriculum, research, and service. The research design is qualitative with narrative inquiry as the governing methodology, allowing participants to tell the stories of their work lives at a time when political volatility and despotism seeks to silence them.

Research Methodology

In order to understand the lived professional experiences of Hungarian university faculty, the researcher has selected narrative inquiry as a methodological approach. Narrative inquiry is an in-depth interview method that "gather[s], analyze[s], and interpret[s] the stories people tell about their lives...beginning with the assumption that people live 'storied' lives and that telling and retelling one's story helps one understand and create a sense of self" (Riessman 1991, in Marshall & Rossman, 2015 p. 155). The researcher will meet with study participants in an off-campus location and will spend several hours engaged in semi-structured interviews. Though conversation will be guided by interview questions, participants will be encouraged toward a sense of authorship—to give voice to their experiences throughout their professional lives, especially to those experiences that have been shaped or affected by higher education reforms—or, in the case of Hungary, anti-reforms.

The hope is that this research will contribute to an understanding of how and if far-right political environments affect Hungarian faculty and internationalization agendas at one university. Though limited by the experiences of the research participants, the researcher believes a comparative examination would uncover similar faculty experiences throughout the region, particularly in those countries currently administered by authoritarian governments. This research plan is propelled by the desire to contribute knowledge about those who work in service of academic freedom and a general belief that despite oppositional efforts, in an era of silences, we must continue tell each other's stories.

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