

**HOLLÓSI HAJNALKA – TORKOS KATALIN – NYILAS ORSOLYA – FUCSKÓ
MÓNKA**

***LET'S TEACH FOR HUNGARY* MENTOR PROGRAM IS FIVE
YEARS OLD AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NYÍREGYHÁZA**

**5 ÉVES A *TANÍTSUNK MAGYARORSZÁGÉRT* MENTORPROGRAM
A NYÍREGYHÁZI EGYETEMEN**

ABSTRACT

In September 2019, the University Nyíregyháza was one of the first four universities to join the *Let's Teach for Hungary* program. Over the past five years, the program has faced numerous challenges, while also achieving significant successes. During this period, the program has evolved from an initial, relatively unknown initiative into a well-functioning practice grounded in extensive experience.

Today, the program operates under the auspices of the National Talent Centre, in close cooperation with the universities participating in the program. In the last five years, we trained mentors in ten semesters, many of whom joined the program and mentored or have been mentoring for more or less time. Training activities continue in both full-time and part-time (correspondence) formats. Currently, 31 students are mentoring, while a further 31 students are participating in the TM1 preparatory course.

We can see that the program is very successful, which is supported by the continuous interest from the students, the elementary schools included in the program are also willing to participate in the program, and the positive feedback from the mentors is also continuous.

Keyword: university, TM program, mentoring, disadvantage, career choice

ÖSSZEFOGLALÓ

2019 szeptemberétől a Nyíregyházi Egyetem az első négy egyetem egyikeként kapcsolódott be a Tanítsunk Magyarorszáért programba. Az elmúlt 5 év számtalan kihívást rejtett magában, de természetesen számtalan sikert is eredményezett. 5 év telt el az ismeretlentől a napjainkra már jól működő, sok tapasztalaton alapuló gyakorlatig.

A program ma a Nemzeti Tehetség Központ égisze alatt működik, természetesen a programba belépett egyetemekkel szorosan együttműködve. Az elmúlt 5 év alatt 10 félévben képeztünk mentorokat, akik közül sokan bekapcsolódtak a programba, és mentoráltak/mentorálnak több-kevesebb ideig, természetesen jelenleg is folyik a képzés, mind nappali, mind levelező képzésben. Jelenleg 31 hallgató végez mentorálást, és szintén 31 hallgató az, aki a TM1 felkészítő kurzuson vesz részt.

A hallgatók között nappali és levelezős hallgatók is vannak. Azt gondoljuk, hogy a program igen sikeres, ezt támasztja alá, az is, hogy folyamatos az érdeklődés a hallgatók részéről, a programba bevont általános iskolák is szívesen vesznek részt a programba, és a mentoráltak részéről is folyamatos a pozitív visszajelzés.

Kulcsszavak: egyetem, TM program, mentorálás, hátrányos helyzet, pályaválasztás

1. Introduction

The *Let's Teach for Hungary* program was launched in 2019 and is still one of the outstanding national programs addressing disadvantaged people, which is coordinated by the universities in the basic institutions involved in the program. The program initially started with the participation of four universities, including the University of Nyíregyháza, and today this number has increased to 21. The program has been consistently successful. The University of Nyíregyháza places great emphasis on the social awareness of students. We consider social responsibility to be our mission, so our undisclosed intention with the program is to develop a solidaristic attitude, draw attention to social difficulties, especially the problems of the downtrodden and the needy, and our main goal is to sensitize them to responsibility (Nyilas–Körei, 2022)

The TM program is one of those programs that support disadvantaged elementary school students, the goal of which is to motivate students to break out of their current socio-cultural situation, to continue their education, to acquire a profession and, to achieve a better life (Fejes–Szűcs, 2009).

The TM program is currently coordinated by the National Talent Centre, with which we are working to meet this expectation. In 2024, the program is already present in 21 universities and more than 100 elementary schools. With the help of university mentors, thousands of elementary school students can benefit from peer mentoring within the framework of the *Let's Teach for Hungary* program. The aim of the program is that by 2030 every child in primary school will have had at least a profession or access to further education.

Currently, we are training mentors among university students in the eleventh semester, and for five years they have been performing mentoring tasks in nine underprivileged elementary institutions of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County, including the settlements of Sényő, Paszab, Tiszabercel, Tiszaeszlár, Tímár, Nagycserkesz, Nyírkarász, Vasmegyer and Kállósején. Seventh- and eighth-grade students from the nine institutions participate in the program, four to five students per mentor.

After completing the TM1 course, the mentors of the University of Nyíregyháza have the competencies necessary for effective mentoring, such as personal competence, communication competence, digital competence, problem-solving ability, teamwork, creative thinking, adaptation, empathy, etc. We consider it particularly important to strengthen empathy and an inclusive approach.

We introduce students to the TM program, its details and purpose, and prepare them to deal with disadvantaged students. We raise their awareness, the

method of which includes drama pedagogy, training sessions, and the use of cooperative group tasks in the courses. The future mentors of the University of Nyíregyháza are therefore professionally and efficiently prepared for mentoring activities, through which the mentors acquire a high level of empathy and become dedicated to working with the mentees. If the students successfully complete the TM1 course, they can then join the mentoring team.

After the mentor candidates pass a training session at the beginning of the semester, they are assigned to a school, and they can start working with 4-5 mentored students each. We continue to support the work of the mentors after this, during the TM2 course, the supervisors effectively support the activities of the mentors, support their work, and provide them with advice in the framework of discussions, discussions, debates and discourses with the mentors in small groups and individual consultations. The contact between the supervisors and the mentors is continuous and takes place on various digital interfaces, in addition to the 2 contact hours per week. The purpose of the TM2 course is to support, help, and assist the mentors, as well as to ensure the immediate and effective handling of emerging problems. Our goal is for the mentors to be sufficiently prepared to respond proactively to emerging problems and communicate with the mentees.

2. Mentoring disadvantaged students

Mentoring disadvantaged students is a priority task, therefore the exemplary mentoring programs that have been launched in recent times to support disadvantaged students are very significant (Fejes, 2009). However, ensuring equal opportunities in education is not among the priority tasks in public opinion.

It is also important to clarify the concept of disadvantage itself, as the *Let's Teach for Hungary* program may include students from disadvantaged institutions. Disadvantage has never been a scientifically defined concept with precise, easily graspable criteria, and has remained a kind of collective concept to this day. The relevant literature, for example, Horváth (2015) generally states that this includes low education of parents, low income, family instability, a high number of dependents, family size, deviance in the microenvironment, the lack of family or intact family, minority ethnic status. Based on Weir's (2011) research, it is argued that the educational level of parents, the financial situation of the family, and the possibility of accessing reading resources have a great influence on the social status of the child. The chances of those with a disadvantaged background of dropping out are much higher than those with higher socioeconomic status.

According to Papp's study, disadvantage is not just a financial hardship, but a complex system of social and cultural disadvantages that reduce the individual's equal opportunities. This situation arises from growing up in a disadvantaged family, which limits opportunities and stems from the social and cultural background. In addition, social disadvantages are characterized not only by poverty or low education, but also by a lack of future opportunities, such as the difficult integration of disadvantaged parents into the labour market (Papp, 1997).

The legal definition of disadvantage states that at least one of three factors (low educational level of the parents, low employment, and inadequate living environment/housing conditions of the child) must be present for the student concerned to be classified within this category. Cumulative disadvantage is defined as the case when at least two of these circumstances are present¹.

In Hungary, family background and the socio-cultural situation of the family have a particularly strong impact on student performance; among the countries participating in the 2003 PISA study, this impact is the strongest in Hungary (OECD, 2004). In our country, as anywhere else in the world, the existence of differences between students is a natural and necessary phenomenon, which partly results from the social position and partly from the different personalities of the students (Csapó, 2003a), however, it is important how society reacts to the existing differences. Reducing differences offers benefits not only for the realization of solidarity and the prosperity of the given individual, but also for society, and the *Let's Teach for Hungary* mentoring program aims to contribute to this goal.

The program primarily seeks to increase the motivation of the mentees through successful studies, further education, and career choices. Increasing the motivation of disadvantaged students is a primary task, as further education after the 8th grade is crucial for the students' future. The question arises as to why this task falls on the mentors working in the program, what role the school and the family have?

The relationship between family background and students' success in school has been confirmed by a series of research studies, and it can be stated that there are significant differences in the development of the skills and abilities of children from different socio-cultural environments (Csapó, 2003b). The pre-school period also plays a significant role in the students' motivation, and the family certainly plays a fundamental role in shaping motives during the school years (Józsa, 2003). The family, which in our case is the cause of the disadvantageous situation, does not have a positive influence on the studies or further education plans of the mentored students. This is also supported by Réthyné's (2001) research, in which most surveyed teachers indicated that the

¹ <https://njt.hu/jogszabaly/1997-31-00-00.101>

family's lack of interest was the first reason for the lack of motivation, and a negative family environment was also mentioned in large numbers.

The school's influence on the mentees' motivation to learn obviously has a positive effect, but the heterogeneity of the students, the high number of students, and the lack of individual treatment strongly inhibit this. That is why we consider the role of the students participating in the mentoring program to be extremely important, as this task is the focus of mentoring for them. The mentors themselves come to university primarily from disadvantaged regions (Hollósi, 2022), so they often decide, due to their own negative experiences, to help students become better prepared for further education and other areas of life, to improve their self-awareness, and to develop their social and interpersonal competencies. Their goal is to show them the way, give them perspective, and encourage them to fulfil their potential.

3. The aim of the study

The aim of the study is to find out what attitude mentors have towards mentoring, what the reasons are why they undertook this noble but difficult task. From the answers received during previous interviews, we already know that the main reason is to help disadvantaged students, and it also turned out that students preparing for helping, teaching, and educational professions (social pedagogues, teachers, kindergarten teachers) are the ones who participate in the program the most. Of course, students from any major can join without any restrictions, so the composition of the mentors is quite heterogeneous. In this study, we would like to present the results obtained during the questionnaire survey of the mentors, in order to learn about their attitudes towards mentoring.

4. Results of the research

The survey was conducted in October and November 2024 among students currently working as mentors at the University of Nyíregyháza. The questionnaire was prepared on a voluntary basis, using a self-completion method, which, in addition to personal aspects, expresses personal feelings and observations related to mentoring, and reflects the feedback of the students. In the year of the study, the program operated with 32 mentors, 22 of whom completed the questionnaire. Considering the socio-economic background of the respondents, it can be said that, as in previous years, there is currently a higher proportion of female students. The ratio is 4:18 (male to female) (Figure 1).

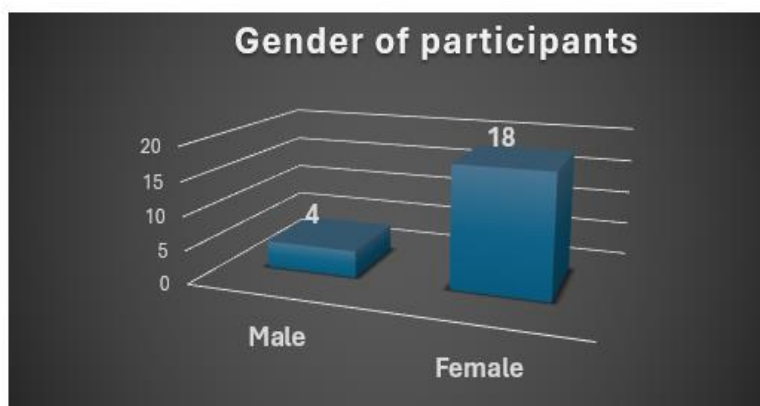


Figure 1: Gender of participants

Source: self-edited

Only students who have active student status at the given higher education institution can engage in mentoring activities, so it was important for us to know what form of training our mentor students are pursuing (Figure 2).

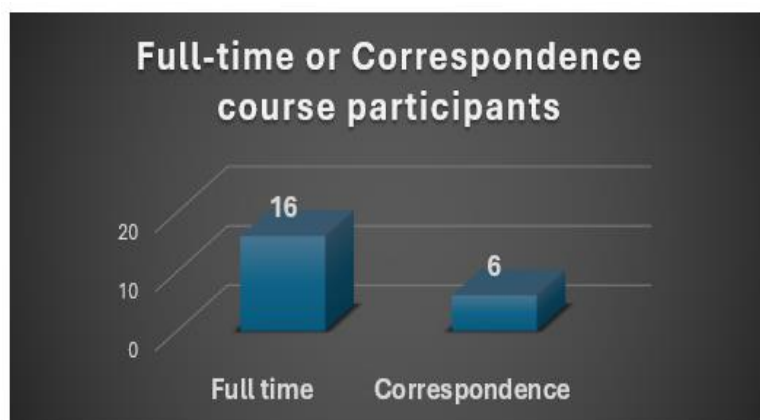


Figure 2: Full-time or Correspondence course participants

Source: self-edited

Another important background factor regarding mentor students is the data on the current year of their studies, from which it will be possible to filter out how long a given student is expected to be able to participate in the mentoring process, which is important for the program in terms of plannability. Since the largest proportion of current university assistants are at the beginning of their training, they are most likely to be able to actively participate in this support process for a long time.

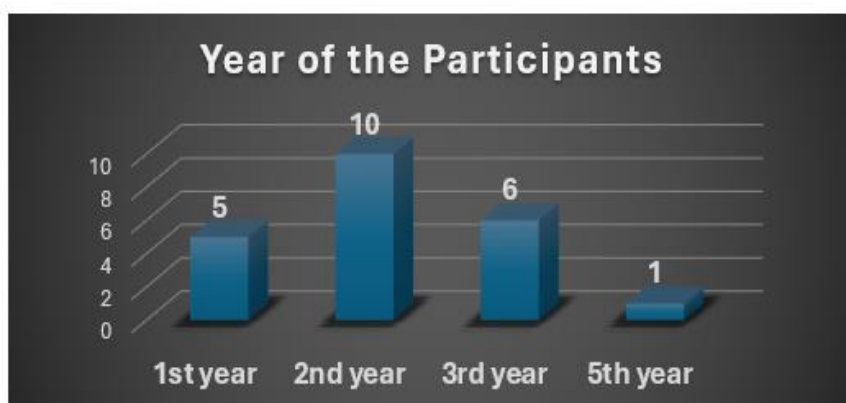


Figure 3: Year of the Participants

Source: self-edited

The next question in the questionnaire asks about the time spent in the program so far, which shows how dedicated our students are and how much experience they have. The data collected showed that the majority have been mentoring for several semesters, and some have even participated in the process continuously throughout their studies, and fortunately there are always new members joining the program. As a result, it seems that there will be a new generation of graduates.

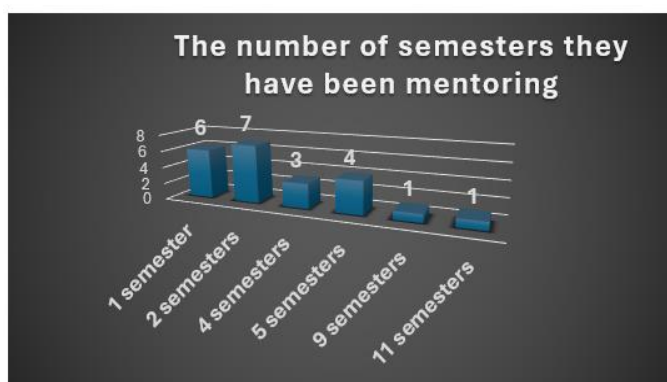


Figure 4: The number of semesters they have been mentoring

Source: self-edited

Following the questions regarding personal data, we were curious to find out which activities are the most defining among the mentoring tasks, which also reflect the feedback of the students, since they also have a say in this process, because these programs are about them.

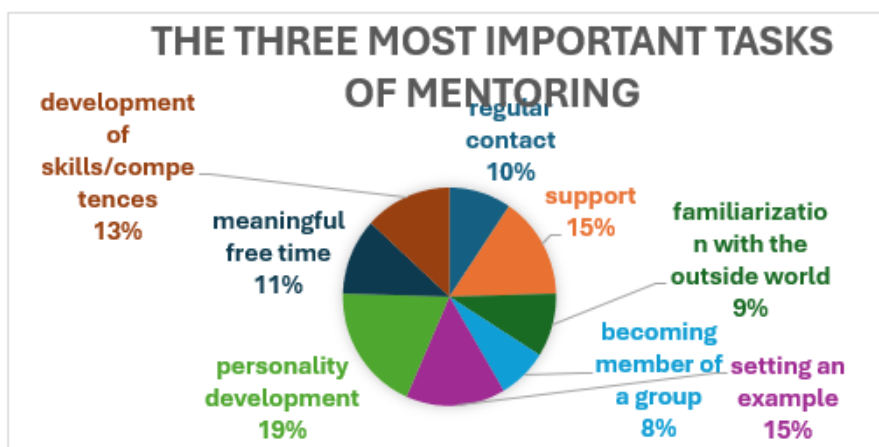


Figure 5: The three most important task of mentoring

Source: self-edited

The task of the mentors in answering the question was to determine which activities were the most decisive for the children. Based on the results, it can be said that each of the listed options is decisive, and there are only small differences between the tasks. The most important, according to the students, are personality development and setting an example, which are closely related, since the basis of mentoring activity is that the helper works with their personality and tries to set an example and highlight future opportunities. Feedback from the students is also important for the mentors, as well as for the program coordinators and leaders, since it is possible to change the everyday work processes accordingly and introduce new alternatives into the activity. The past semesters represent clearly that this type of helping activity is important for the students and they consider mentoring activity to be very useful and important.

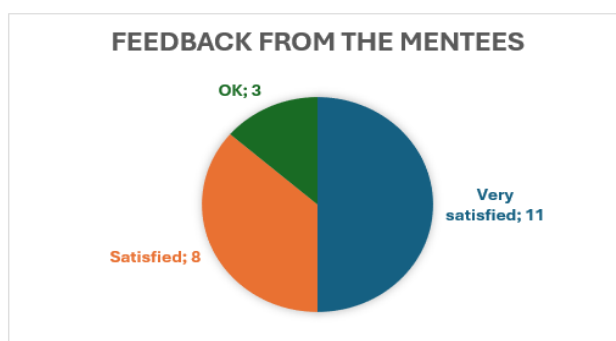


Figure 6: Feedback from the mentees

Source: self-edited

The popular programs and the wide range of programs make participation in mentoring activities even more attractive for young people, as it greatly changes and enriches their everyday lives, and they will have experiences that they probably would not have had the opportunity for without the implementation of the program. For students (based on their feedback), participation in programs outside of school and the settlement has always been decisive, as they have few opportunities to get to know their more distant environment.

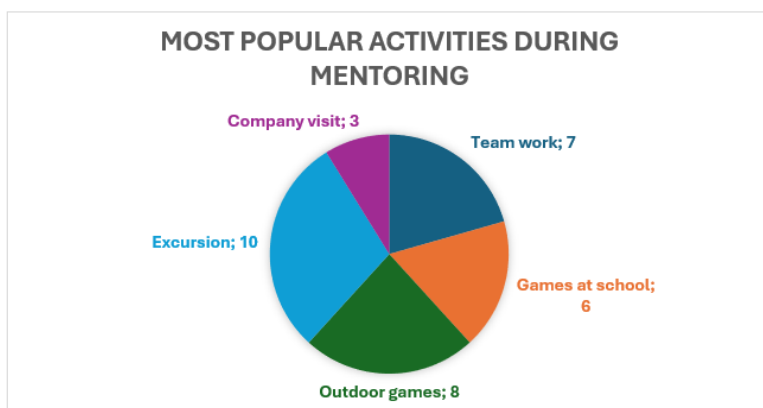


Figure 7: Most popular activities during mentoring
Source: self-edited

At the end of the series of questions, we were curious about the programs. What kind of evaluation do the special programs organized by the university so far receive, and which ones are most likely to generate significant interest in the coming semesters?

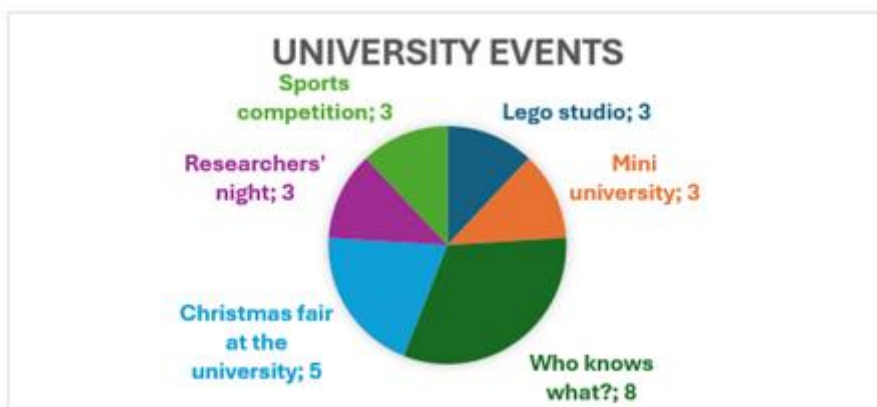


Figure 8: University events
Source: self-edited

The opinions clearly reflect that events where students can show their talents, such as *Who Knows What*, have attracted great interest, which was well represented by the number of participants and the high-quality productions that students from different schools have produced. Among these, we have seen in the past semesters: individual and group dance productions, songs, instrumental music, but also the presentation of one's own poem. The next very popular event of the program is the Christmas fair, which is being held for the 3rd time this year, which awaits young people with a Christmas atmosphere, flavours and decorations on the university grounds.

At the end of the questionnaire, we asked open-ended questions to find out what joys and difficulties the mentors had experienced during their mentoring so far. The answers clearly show that the most joyful tasks have emotional implications: pl. *"when we plan games, programs and experiences together and I see that the children find joy in them"* or *"when they take their tasks seriously and I see their desire to do something"* or *"when they open up honestly"* or *"when I see the development in their speech."* But there were those who said, *"I can help them choose a career, that I can open a new world for them."* For one of our mentoring students for nine semesters, *"staying in touch after graduation"* is one of the most joyful experiences

Among the most difficult tasks, there were also practical obstacles, such as *"organizing transportation for longer trips"* or *"planning tasks thoroughly and not leaving anything at home."* But discipline is also often a serious obstacle, and unfortunately, several mentors have encountered the negative experience that despite preparing something, *"the children don't always like the task"* and *"passivity is common when they don't feel like doing anything."*

For some, concentrating was the most difficult task *"because they want to know so much about the world, I get so many questions that I can't answer them all at once"*. But for others, *"the most difficult thing is to allocate time and spending money to get to as many programs as possible."* The mentor who had trouble *"fulfilling the mentoring role well, that is, finding a balance,"* put it aptly. For one of the students who has been mentoring for the third semester, the most difficult task in mentoring is *"to orient the parents of the mentored children and to convince them, together with the teachers, that their children can choose a career that suits their talents, that parents should not underestimate their children, that they should give them a chance, that we can guide them towards a school education that suits their talents."*

During the TM1 course, we try to prepare future mentors for the realities of being disadvantaged, yet one of the students who had been mentoring for a semester said: *"The hardest part for me was when I found out about the family background of one of the children. I know that these children are*

disadvantaged, but it still affected me a little mentally, and I spent days thinking about how I could make this child's life a little better."

5. Conclusions

In today's fast-paced world, we are becoming more and more insensitive to the people around us, we often pass by those who need support, compassion, and care.

The TM program proves exactly the opposite, as mentors can help mentees whose families are unable to provide extracurricular activities, which is not necessarily due to the family's financial situation, but rather to disadvantaged socio-cultural situation.

We believe that the necessity of the TM program cannot be questioned, as mentors not only prepare students for their long-term success by facilitating their career decisions, but also provide direction for their everyday lives. Mentoring is not one-sided; the student also benefits from mentoring, as they gain practical experience that cannot be gained through mere lexical knowledge. Those who help others also develop themselves. This is a program that enriches the lives of both parties.

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