

# The role of teachers and parents in the decision-making process of secondary-school students regarding their higher education choices

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Today universities face major challenges in respect of application processes, and so it is an increasingly difficult problem for them to attract students to institutions due to the ongoing changes in Higher Education (HE) itself and in government policy. The purpose of this study is to analyse what we might term the ‘coaching and counselling’ activities of two significant groups of people who are only indirectly concerned: parents and teachers. Our results are based on in-depth interviews conducted with parents and teachers of pupils in their 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> forms, with two special focus groups among first-year students at the Faculty of Business and Economics of the University of Pécs, and on a questionnaire completed by 603 pupils from the same secondary school years. Our results suggest that parents have a moderate influence on students’ decisions, although financial factors are becoming increasingly important for them, sometimes making it necessary to override the preferences or decisions of their children. The most important function of teachers in the HE decisionmaking process is to provide their pupils with all relevant information concerning HE. Clearly, if they are to attract students, universities need to understand the motives of parents and the role of teachers in the process.

**Keywords:** higher education marketing, enrolment, bachelor programme, marketing communication, empirical research, student (consumer) behaviour.

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## Introduction

This study does not deal with conceptual and definitive questions, since other authors (Kuráth 2004, 2007a; Sáfrány 2005, 2006) discuss the

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development, the target groups and marketing assets of 'Enrolment Marketing'.

Both the importance and timeliness of enrolment marketing are supported by several arguments. Drastic regulatory restructuring in the Hungarian HE market, increasing competition, the continuing decline in applicant numbers and significant changes in the labour market are all factors which make the marketing strategy of HE institutions increasingly important - and especially the planning of their enrolment strategy.

Broadly speaking, the target groups for enrolment marketing are: students in general, the actual applicants, teachers, parents, the job market and society. Unusually, with HE, the buyer and the consumer are rarely the same person. The students are the actual consumers (Harker et al. 2001, Conard and Conard 2001, Shash et al. 1999, Corbitt 1998, Browne et al. 1998, Joseph and Joseph 1997), whilst the parents, the job market and society can be regarded as the buyers. All have some degree of interest in the decision-making process and, clearly, in the vast majority of cases, the consumers (the students) make the final decision. However, the buyers exercise indirect influence and so, as finance providers, play an indirect role in the effects of HE. In this study, however, we focus on the role played by the actual consumers and by their teachers and parents in the decision-making process in Further Education (FE).

To take a more narrow focus, the target groups can be viewed from different angles (internal – external, education level of their membership and the level targeted, residence, age, type of secondary school, family background, etc). For the purposes of this study, our questionnaire was drawn up targeting the Bachelor programme, namely 17 to 19 years old secondary school pupils. These are on the border between Generations Y and Z; or, rather, they belong mainly to Generation Z. The age-range of this group means that its members are either on the threshold of their majority or have just reached it. In consequence, most need some support in respect of one of the most important decisions of their life. It follows that their parents and teachers, as the main influencers and

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stakeholders, must also be taken into consideration during the planning of any enrolment marketing activity.

### **Research objective and methodology**

The conducted exploratory research consists of the following main parts. Firstly we focused on secondary research with the aim to reveal the main changes and challenges due to the new education policy and the features of the target segment, the Z generation. Furthermore we investigated the characteristics of the HE from the perspective of service marketing. On the basis of the secondary research we conducted a primary research. The main aims were to explore the factors influencing secondary school pupils in their decisions regarding Further Education and to identify the main stages and actors of the process (their choice of location, type of institution, faculty etc.).

Our primary research uses four methods: ten in-depth interviews were undertaken with secondary school teachers (form-masters and career masters) and a further ten with the parents of students in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> forms. In addition, two focus groups (using psychodrama) were organised with 1<sup>st</sup> year Bachelor students at the Faculty of Business and Economics, University of Pécs. The objective of these interviews and psychodrama groups was to discover main decision habits, to gain insights into the decision-making process as well as into parents', teachers' and students' different initiatives. Based on the result of these qualitative methods, an online questionnaire was compiled in order to reveal secondary school students' opinions, information gathering habits and decision-making process in connection with HE. A questionnaire was administered to 603 secondary school pupils in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> forms. This was handled in part on a face-to-face basis and partly via the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) method. The results for the 'indirectly concerned' segment will be shown in this study. Our goal is to investigate whether the role of the parents and teachers and their information gathering and supporting habits in connection with HE really reflect the above mentioned information asymmetry and high perceived risk.

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## **Theoretical basis**

### ***Specifics of Generations Y and Z***

According to ‘youth research’, it is clear that defining groups of young people is difficult, since the age limits of different groups can be established biological, sociological and legal criteria which do not necessarily coincide.

As a result, Generation Y is defined in a variety of ways by different authors. Some researchers limit this Generation to people born between 1980 and 1997 (Johnson and Hanson 2006), others to those born between 1980 and 2000 (Cheung et al. 2008), while a third group consider the period between 1982 and 1995 (Tari 2010). The last view is the most generally accepted, although, for the purpose of our study, the actual bracket used is not important.

The members of Generation Y typically do not accept traditional values; they have positive attitudes and are sometimes idealists. They are open to novelty, and the internet seems to have encouraged a kind of practical attitude among them. This is also typical of their attitude in the world of work, where they handle change flexibly.

Generation Y are active users of Facebook, the most popular online social community page in Hungary. Some 24% communicate online with their friends rather than offline (Ipsos 2012a). The internet’s effects on their work, concentration and focus are first seen here. This generation are able to divide their attention and so they are able to simultaneously play with numerous TV channels whilst chatting with their friends, listening to music and using the internet. However, this divided attention does not mean that their connections are superficial. As this generation grew up with technological development, its members mostly regard the internet as a highly valid source of information, even if, unfortunately, it does not necessarily mean a reliable base of knowledge (Tari 2010, ITHAKA 2011).

In Hungary, according to Ipsos research, it is worthwhile using the social media to reach Generation Y since 74% have already ‘clicked’ on an advertisement placed on a social community’s pages (Ipsos 2012b). Another trend, online word-of-mouth, builds on personal influence when, first of all, some opinion leader is persuaded to disseminate the

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received information, with the result that the advertisement spreads like wildfire among the community's members.

Generation Z is made up of children born in the period between the mid-1990s to date. They have grown up in a completely digitalized world and are commonly believed to have acquired this name from the English word “zapper” (wikipedia.com) which, *inter alia*, means ‘remote control’. They are also referred to as the ‘Internet Generation’ or ‘digital natives’ (Schmidt and Hawkins 2008). This generation has been used to everything being mobile and digitalised and their attention can focus on several things at the same time; they solve their problems flexibly and, we might say, in a mobile way. They spend much time in front of the computer; 65% of them use the internet daily or several times a day. There are, however, significant differences between urban and rural youth. Whilst 75% of young people from Budapest use the internet daily, the same can be said only about half of those in smaller settlements (Ipsos F&F 2011). The internet has become an inseparable part of life for the young; they entertain, gather information, make friends and relax here (MRSZ 2010, Kósa and László 2011). According to the research data provided by the National Media and Communication Authority on the technical and communication equipment owned by 13-17 year-olds and their families, 91% of these households have wired or mobile internet connection, about 98% of young people have their own mobile phone and 43% have internet access.

There is a relatively wide gap between Generations Y and Z since the latter has grown up in a more dynamic and constantly changing environment. To understand their behaviour it is very important to recognise their dominant characteristics as summarised by Törőcsik (2011. 214): “... the age of uncertainty was left behind for them.” They are the first truly global generation. They are the smallest generation and this will have an effect on their position in the labour market in that the competition will be less strong for them than for today's entrants. However, they now consider daily life situations as stressful (Tari 2012, Törőcsik 2011) and this is in spite of the research results of Törőcsik (2011), who made the interesting observation that the members of the

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young generations live better and more well-balanced lives than the average Hungarian. It is, therefore, not surprising that, among the lifestyle groups in the 16-24 years old bracket, the “experience consumers” are the most significant group (33%), followed by the “social centre” (30%), the “fast-modern” group (15%) and, lastly, the “emerging group” (13%) (Törőcsik 2011).

Generation Z members are more independent and more individual than those of Generation Y, thanks to their mobile gadgets and to their more active presence in the virtual communities. Their independence is associated with their near-total self-sufficiency, and this presumably is also the case with the Further Education (FE) decision-making process. There remains the question of the extent to which this generation is receptive to the messages from HE institutes or the media.

According to the research by Törőcsik (2011), the most important factors in the decisions of the group of “experience consumers” regarding HE institutions are: the atmosphere of the institution, study programmes, entertainment opportunities and a modern infrastructure. Other important factors are their friends’ choices and the admission requirements. They prefer short-term goals, and evaluate HE as a service process in terms of its tangible features and immediate results. The “social centre” and “emerging” groups are more conscious and take price, convenience, availability and prospective salary into consideration as they make their HE-related decisions.

Career decisions have always been very significant and high-risk decisions, and the considerations generated by today’s frequent social and economic changes obviously do not make this decision-making process any easier; neither do they help in forming a clear view of the future or long-term planning.

***Sources of information for the ‘concerned’ and the ‘indirectly concerned’***

Realignment is slowly taking place in terms of the ways in which secondary school-leavers spend their free time, that is, by favouring the internet at the expense of TV. However, in respect of the credibility of information sources, personal contacts are the main ones as the

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information provided by parents and teachers is trustworthy and supposedly acceptable by the young (Kósa and László 2011). According to the results of a separate research project (investigating the orientation channels of 10 400 new entrants and 16 500 experienced employees) those born after 1992 prefer to obtain information in an informal way from their own network of connections. More concretely, members of Generations Y and Z prefer university job fairs, mailing lists, company presentations and their teachers' opinion supporting their job decisions (AonHewitt 2012).

Generation Z are usually children of Generation X or older Generation Y, but there are also some younger baby boomers (55+) among the parents. Parental values are obviously reflected in the world of the young. Although in different ways, a significant number of parents must fight to retain their given living standard or even for subsistence. Often they are unaware of their own aim in life, or they may have to struggle to maintain their position in the labour market. (They might indeed be jobless). Although they seem self-confident, they do not necessarily set a good example for their child. Parents' technical know-how and use of the internet varies widely, but, generally, they do not share a common language with their children. This is important since the young can best be approached via the internet and social media. Young people need far more information than their parents did in their day and ways of information search and processing used by the young appear as a response to the challenges of our performance-oriented world. The majority of parents feel powerless, and professional teachers find it difficult to relate to this generation (Tari 2012).

The younger generations of our era are confronted with increasingly difficult career choices. The reality is that, whilst this age group becomes consumers early, their responsible and independent adult life is postponed. The difficulties associated with embarking on one's working life are supported by data such as those provided by the Central Statistical Office (KSH in Hungarian) according to which, in May-July 2012, the number of unemployed was 459 000, equal to a 10.5% unemployment rate. Of the total number of unemployed, 18% belong to the 15-24 age bracket, which features rather weakly in the

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labour market. This group's unemployment rate of 28.1% is 3.1 percentage points higher than that of the previous year. The average length of unemployment was 17.8 months (KSH 2012).

One of the most interesting secondary sources for our research were the results of European Youth Research's (EIKKA) national youth survey showing the connections between Hungarian secondary schools and HE, as well as its problems (Jancsák and Polgár 2010). This investigation shows that students' strongest motivation for further studies is to avoid unemployment and to build a career (which is supposed to go hand in hand with a high level of social awareness). Parental qualifications are not an influencing factor according to the study, but the role of parents and friends as control factors in making choices for further studies seems to be strong.

The relationship between secondary and higher education has become extremely complicated because of the Bologna process. Students have to evaluate a good deal of information – a process in which neither parents nor teachers can seriously help. “Adults (teachers and parents alike) orientating-helping-supporting the young before further studies are characterised by a great lack of information about the world of Higher Education (the inner world of each institution, the content and outcome of programmes)” (Jancsák and Polgár 2010. 32). According to the teachers participating in the survey, parents and students have distorted pictures of HE programmes as a result of the inaccurate and incomplete information circulating in the communication channels.

### ***Approach to HE from the perspective of services marketing***

A special approach to HE marketing which follows the general principles of services marketing appeared first in the 1990s (Shnaks et al. 1993), clearly acknowledging that, within the services sector, HE is a service having numerous special characteristics (Liu 1998). It might, therefore, be useful to review those characteristics which may help us to understand the complexity of the decision-making process and the difference between specific Enrolment Marketing and general Services Marketing.

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HE as a service is characterised by a two-sided risk relating to performance. The supplier institution and the user alike enter the process with a significant, perceived risk. The risk perceived by the user regarding performance is one of the most crucial factors influencing the decision. The outcome of the service is knowledge itself, but in the form of a graduate who has acquired adequate professional knowledge. This cannot be known at the time of decision-making since it is an experience-based product (Zeithaml 1981). At the same time, the process is an essential part of a service product which might last a long time – even a number of years. Parameters determining the perception of quality may well change during the process and may overwrite the requirements of output quality, even if only temporarily. Aspects which are important before and after entering HE differ. Short-term and long-term interests seem to mingle. There are short-term goals prior to entry, such as the hope of being accepted in ‘a good place’, and long-term goals, such as earning a marketable diploma. In some cases, short-term goals do not even exist for supporting parents and teachers.

Certainly everyone involved is aware of the fact that this is a long-term investment – or at least a decision – and the decision-maker has to set his own expectations regarding the future labour market. They obviously collect information about the current state of affairs, but perceive (or could perceive) the trends, the changes concerning the popularity of different professions. Accordingly, getting to know the complex product directly is not possible, and so decision-makers try to reduce the perceived risk by exploiting all the information sources available before their decision. They study welcoming messages in the media (at some stages actively looking for them), seek information from people they know and from current students, and visit universities on their open days. Current students, whose perception of quality is limited and who must be heavily influenced by a good deal of subjectivity, seem to be an important information source.

The information asymmetry between institutions of higher education and students comes partly from the above features (Bay and Daniel 2001). Earlier evaluation of the quality of HE is nearly impossible and it is obvious that the prospective student does not have

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the same view of the future as the institutions. It is clear that the expectations of students and applicants are based on inadequate information.

The next influencing factor is that students do not pay, or pay only partially, for their education: they are state-funded or financed by their parents. Students pay for their own tuition fees in very few cases. Certainly, students do pay for their education in terms of time, energy and effort invested during the years spent in HE or in terms of the income lost by not working in a job of some sort, although HE is often a way of avoiding unemployment (Mészáros 2012).

These factors make the decision-making process and collecting objective information difficult both for students and for their supporters, i.e. their parents and teachers. The situation has now become even more complicated by the uncertainty generated by the changes implemented in HE in 2011, by the ongoing economic crisis and by the unpredictable steps of the government.

### **Primary research results**

#### ***Motivation for Further Education (FE)***

In the psychodrama focus groups of first year university students, two groups of motives are visible and both have a strong relationship with the respective family backgrounds. On the one hand, students came to university since this was a family tradition: their parents have degrees, and continuing the tradition is somehow expected of them (“I was born into these expectations”). On the other hand, the family background can produce a totally contrary reaction: students want to rise above their parents’ level of education and they also feel their ability to realise this ambition (“I day-dreamed; there were no highly educated people in my family).

According to the in-depth interviews with parents, it is clear that all the parents interviewed, irrespective of their education level and financial situation, think a degree is important, useful and essential to finding a job and to prosperity. Several of them said that, today, a degree is worth the same as the so-called School Leaving Certificate (from a secondary school) of their own youth. Among our respondents there is a

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family consensus in connection with the role and importance of Further Education.

***The HE decision-making process from the perspectives of parents and teachers***

According to the in-depth interviews with parents, it is totally clear for the majority of our respondents that FE was already in their mind during elementary school years (and even during kindergarten). Similarly, the teachers questioned highlighted two groups from among their school-leaver pupils:

- Pupils with a good family background (at least secondary school educated parents and a supportive home atmosphere), good abilities and good school achievements know very early (in the 9<sup>th</sup> year) that they will go into Higher Education.
- Students with a disadvantaged family background (poorly educated parents and modest financial circumstances), poor abilities and no more than medium school achievements scarcely make a decision and, if they make it, it is at the last minute.

According to the observations of parents and teachers, a pupil's academic path is generally decided in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> form, when students choose their optional courses. Their specific path or discipline is refined, that is to say, the particular faculty and university are chosen in the 12<sup>th</sup> form, often just before the application deadline. In these cases, the logical sequence of first choosing the institution and then deciding on the faculty simply cannot be seen and often these decisions are made in the same time.

The results of the questionnaire completed by pupils in their 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> forms support and refine the views of the teachers and parents questioned. From the results, three clusters emerge based on the answers to questions on the time dimension of the HE decision-making process:

- 33% can be classed among the group of “conscious students”. They are those who had already decided on FE during their elementary school years and chose the area of their future specialisation in their 10<sup>th</sup> year (together with their optional courses), although their decisions concerning the specific faculty and institution were taken in their 10<sup>th</sup>
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or 11<sup>th</sup> form, earlier than the parents had suggested.

- 58.5% of respondents are “average decision-makers”, who make decisions about everything rather late: about FE in their 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> year, about the discipline in the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> year, and about the institution and the faculty in their 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> year.

- 8.5% of the pupils interviewed can be described as the “impulsive group”. The members of this group postpone their decision about FE even longer – in their 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> year, and about the specialisation, faculty and institution at the very last minute.

Aided by the questionnaire, we also have answers to the question of whether, after choosing the discipline, pupils make their decisions about faculty or institution earlier. Our results show that the “conscious students” and the “average decision makers” decide earlier about the faculty than about the institution. This process is reversed in the case of the “impulsive group”.

If we compare the results of the in-depth interviews with parents, with teachers and the questionnaires filled in by secondary school pupils, we can affirm the following:

- In the case of the in-depth interviews with parents, early decisions seemed to be typical. This matches the questionnaire’s cluster of “conscious students” (33%). Hence, whilst in-depth interviews with parents show the conscious attitude as general, questionnaire research set this phenomenon right. The result of the difference may be found in that parents from conscious families were more willing to answer. According to the teachers’ responses, the ratio of the “conscious students” is higher (even 70-80%) in the good and best performing secondary schools. In the lower quality schools their ratio is about 10-40 %.

- Based on the estimation of teachers, the proportion of the “average decision-makers” is 40-50 %.

- According to the teachers interviewed, pupils from a disadvantaged family background and/or with limited abilities (those who decide at the last moment), could be identified with the “impulsive group” cluster. The teachers estimated their ratio around 30-50%.

We would also like to draw attention to a further important issue.

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Shaping the decision-making process is significantly influenced by the changes in the regulation of Hungarian HE in recent years. As one of the respondents (she is a career master) indicated, the time of decision for FE has changed significantly over the last few years. Whilst, previously, students “were much surer, and many were already sure at the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> year” where they would go; nowadays, she thinks that 50% is the current ratio of those students who decide only at the very last minute. “We feel this uncertainty also with parents. This was the first year when parents also visited me at my open hours and asked”. Financial viability has become a very important point and so students and parents postpone the decision due to the changeable nature of the regulations. Hence, parental uncertainty and their desire to wait is another factor in postponing the decision. The results show that the changes in the regulations of HE and financial viability enhance the perceived risk of HE decision.

### ***The role of teachers in Further Education decisions***

In the opinion of parents, students interested in FE are very independent; they do not allow anyone to influence them. Parents may have the greatest influence, but the informants also mentioned the role of University Open Days, presentations in schools by form-masters and older friends (already studying in HE institutions). It seems that parents do not credit teachers with much real influence.

Our responding teachers also consider students independent, and so they target them (not parents) with communication about career and FE. In general they do not give particular advice, but they ask the right questions (students can think them over with their parents). Career masters evaluate the form-masters’ role as more important than the parents’, especially if they have a direct and good relationship with their pupils. Therefore, by their own admission, secondary school teachers do not influence pupils and do not take part in their decision in a direct way, but they explain the important factors and their opinion of the decision. Our responding teachers underlined that they have to emphasise rather the long-term factors, since the short-term entrance requirements and the students’ preferences matter most.

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Our questionnaire revealed that pupils consider the influencing factor of teachers as less than ‘moderately important’. They graded it at 2.72 on a 5-point scale. In this respect, there is no significant difference between the three clusters and so teachers have an information provider role rather than direct influence. Obviously, the fullest range of information should be available and for the pupils it is obvious that their teachers are well informed about all of the aspects related to HE. It is very important what and how much information teachers provide, since this will naturally influence their students’ decisions. It seemed to be an interesting opportunity to examine what communication activities secondary schools organise to help students with their career orientation. According to the in-depth interviews with teachers, there are 3 stages:

- In secondary schools thinking about FE begins in the 10<sup>th</sup> form, when students have to choose their optional course of study. This period is important since the chosen course technically determines the FE discipline for the majority of students. Therefore, in this period they are given detailed information about the situation in the different disciplines of Higher Education, especially concerning admission requirements and admission scores. This information makes it easier for pupils to narrow their possibilities and compare their abilities with the requirements.

- The next important stage is the 11<sup>th</sup> form, when schools are informed about the required admission scores and more specific questions emerge, such as the method of calculating scores.

- The 3<sup>rd</sup> stage of the information process is at the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> year, when faculties and institutions ‘market’ themselves. In January, when the admission web pages are opened, pupils are taught how to use them.

Secondary schools provide information about HE for pupils and parents in different ways:

- during the so-called ‘form-master’ classes
  - by career masters (who have open hours)
  - during the so-called ‘parents’ meetings’
  - by organizing the so-called ‘career days’
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- by purchasing the annual admission information book
  - through publicity posters and brochures provided by the HE institutions
  - through enrolment presentations delivered by HE institutions
  - by inviting alumni students
  - through the social media, e.g. Facebook etc.

All in all, the role of secondary school teachers, especially form-masters and career masters, can be evaluated as significant. Although neither pupils nor parents associate teachers with influencing factors, their information-providing function is unquestionable since providing appropriate information is a key issue in an HE institution's enrolment marketing activity.

The in-depth interviews with teachers reveal that they plan to be well-informed in connection with FE and that they use several information sources for this purpose (see Table 1).

### ***The role of parents in HE decisions***

Every research method shows that parents have a moderately important role in a student's HE decision-making process. Parents themselves also have the same opinion: students are independent; they do not allow anyone to interfere in their FE decisions and, if they do, then the parents' words are the most accepted. Nevertheless, the parents interviewed stated that, literally, they had not interfered. Most of them declared that they had really not wanted to influence their children and would not like to press something on them: "We support anything he would like to do; only he must like it". In an ideal case, parents only strengthen them, ask questions, draw attention to pitfalls, listen, answer and help if necessary. In the opinion of the majority of the parents, with all these roles, they do have a significant effect on their children's decisions.

Serious discussion within the family about Further Education begins in the 10<sup>th</sup> year. In general, only close family members take part in this: the student, the parents and older brothers and sisters. This buying centre will generally discuss a number of topics: the student's abilities, talent and fields of interest, which disciplines and faculties are

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worth considering, what the family budget allows and how the regulation of HE is developing.

From the in-depth interviews with teachers, four groups of parents emerge:

- One segment of parents is not interested in FE; they do not collect information, do not participate in the meetings organized by the secondary schools or HE institutions. Generally, these parents do not possess any higher degree, and/or their child has no chance to be admitted to HE based on his ability and talent.

- Parents of ‘very conscious’ students, who possess a clear vision, also gather less information since they trust their children, leave the information gathering to them and accept their decisions. These parents, for instance, may not attend open days activities or parents’ meetings in HE institutions.

- The majority of parents gather information primarily from the secondary school (about admission score calculations, about the difference between the levels of final examinations, and about the financial circumstances of Further Education); they do not interfere in their children’s choice of institution and faculty, being mostly interested in financial questions.

- Parents (in general degree holders) who play a major role in their children’s FE decision-making. There are two main motivations: on the one hand, they are the parents of ‘uncertain’ students with weaker school achievements, and they help more actively, by taking part in all the events; on the other hand, these parents want to orient their children towards a particular faculty or institution.

The results of the questionnaire shows that 64.5% of responding students made their FE decision with their parents, and that only 35% decided alone. According to their replies, parents were rated at 3.5, friends at 3.06 and teachers at 2.72 on the 5-point scale. These data show the importance of these groups in influencing decisions in this field. If the three main groups (parents, teachers, and friends) are taken into account, we can conclude that the students evaluated their parents’ influence as the most important.

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***Parents' and students' perspectives in FE decisions***

Parents, teachers and students were also asked about the parents' opinions of disciplines and institutions. According to the parents' common opinion, the financial situation of the family influences the decision on Further Education and only the extent of this effect varies. Four parents (out of ten) declared that financial factors were very crucial; that is, the family in no way could afford to pay tuition fees and/or choose an institution in a remote location. These limitations *a priori* exclude certain faculties (for instance Business and Economics). In the case of the other six responding parents, financial factors are important, but they are able and willing to make sacrifices for their children's future.

To determine the crucial factors influencing the HE decision, the parents were given a list of 22 items and asked to choose the 5 most important. The answers showed the factors below to be the most important (with frequency of mention in brackets):

- Prospective job opportunities (8)
- The reputation of the institution (6)
- Ability to study (i.e, which subject one is good at) (4)
- Entry difficulties (i.e. minimum points level) (4)
- Tuition fees (4)
- Job opportunities in the institution's location, in addition to studies (4).

Our responding teachers were asked to compare the factors listed by the pupils with those of the parents. In their opinion there are points of conflict between the generations, such as:

- Parents typically try to persuade students to choose the local HE institution, although students would prefer to move and be independent.
- For parents, the market value of the diploma and the potential career opportunities seem more important than to the students.
- Students, unlike parents, accord more importance to student life and the entertainment opportunities in an institution.

In the questionnaire, the secondary school pupils were also asked about the factors that are important to their parents in connection with

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their FE decision and the responses about their parents views can be interesting:

- It seems that parents evaluate prospective job opportunities as the most important factor, which favours faculties of Business and Economics.

- The parents' point of view differs significantly from the students' belief in two respects. Six of the ten parents interviewed evaluate the "good reputation of the HE institution" as very important although students rarely thought of it (11<sup>th</sup> place). The other four parents think that "job opportunities in the institution's town in addition to studies" is an important aspect to consider, but this factor ranks only 15<sup>th</sup> on the students' list.

### ***The information sources of students, parents and teachers***

Students, parents and teachers use different channels and methods for collecting information about HE based on their generational differences. The results of our survey show that teachers are required to be well-informed and that parents also make efforts to gather essential information in their desire to help their children make the great decision. Table 1 shows the main information sources of students, parents and secondary school teachers.

The parents and teachers interviewed were also asked about reliable information sources. Above all, they consider independent people most reliable. For parents these are their own child, their child's older friends (who attend an HE institution), teachers, the form master, relatives and friends, while for teachers, the present and former students of a HE institution.

### **Conclusions**

The HE decision-making process is multipersonal and multi-dimensional. A decision about an intangible and scarcely assessable service and that involves a long-term commitment has to be made in an unstable environment based on restricted information. Higher Education is characterised as a two-sided risky process. There is an information asymmetry between the institutions of HE and students, and so getting to know the complex product directly is not possible.

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Table 1. Information sources of students, parents and teachers

Type of the information source	Students	Parents	Teachers
Personal	Friends Older friends (who attend HE institution) Secondary school: • Form-masters • Career masters	Students Secondary school: • Parents' meetings • Form-masters • Career masters Friends, relatives, colleagues	Alumni students HE institutions' contacts
Commercial	HE institutions': • internet websites • presentations in the sec. school • Open Days • leaflet	HE institutions': • internet websites • Open Days	HE institutions': • internet websites • presentations in the sec. school • leaflet
Public	Felvi.hu Annual admission information book	Felvi.hu Annual admission information book Media news	Felvi.hu Annual admission information book Media news
Empirical	–	Own HE experience	Own HE experience

*Source: own research*

Hence decision-makers must endeavour to reduce the perceived risk by exploiting all available information sources before the decision is made. Meanwhile, the relationship between secondary and higher education has become extremely complicated because of the Bologna process.

Students, parents and teachers use different channels and methods for collecting information about Higher Education based on their generational differences in evaluating the various elements of this complex service.

Our research highlights some changes in HE that have definitely influenced the decision-making process. On the one hand, the time horizon for the final decision has changed, the tendency being for the final decision to be postponed due to students' uncertainty. The parents' own uncertainty and consequent dilatory behaviour reinforce postponing decisions. On the other hand, the influencing factors have been realigned in that financing has become an extremely important issue. It is obvious that personal information sources are the most important and so the role of parents as financiers and of teachers as primary information sources represents a significant aspect in the Higher Education decision-making process.

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