

István Lengvári

The Social Composition of Medical Students at the Erzsébet University in the 1920s

Abstract

The study presents the social composition of students who graduated from the Faculty of Medicine of the Erzsébet University in Pozsony (Bratislava) from 1918 and then after a temporary stay in Budapest, in Pécs from the autumn of 1923 until the academic year 1929/1930. The article specifically examines the output of university education, excluding students who dropped out or transferred to another institution. It presents the recruitment and mobility of the student body by statistical analysis of the religion, place of birth and father/guardian occupation of the medical graduates of the selected period. The statistical survey shows a large number of Israelites and those born in Budapest. The occupational composition of the father/guardian largely consists of three groups: public and private officials – professionals – traders and large business owners. A separate subchapter deals with the changes resulting from the *numerus clausus* law in the composition of medical students in Pécs, as well as the attitude of the university in Pécs and its impact on the Hungarian higher education market. The clear goal of the university management was to ensure the survival of the university by increasing the number of students. The main reason for applying *numerus clausus* as loosely as possible was also the fact that the number of Christian students remained low, often failing to fill in the allotted numbers. Finally, the paper presents possible further research opportunities.

Keywords: university history, social history, social mobility, Hungary, interwar period, numerus clausus, medical doctors

The refugee university and its medical faculty in Pécs

The Hungarian Royal Erzsébet University in Pozsony (Bratislava) opened its doors in 1912, but it was not until 1914 that education began at the Faculty of Law and then at the Faculty of Medicine in 1918. The university had barely operated for a year before it was closed down in 1919, after the occupation by Czech troops. The institution became homeless, operating in Budapest from the 1920/1921 academic year. Soon a decision was made about the new seat of the institution and on 1 October 1923, the university opened its doors in Pécs, which, in addition to the Faculties of Law, Humanities and Medicine, was supplemented by the Lutheran Theological Faculty in Sopron. The buildings of health care institutions and former schools handed over by the city provided the foundations for the operation of the university and the medical faculty within it. Compared to the two rural university centres (Szeged, Debrecen), the university in Pécs was always underfunded. Through providing health care to the city's population, the clinics received special attention from the host city as well, and by the 1930s, the higher education of Pécs and specifically the medical faculty had achieved significant results in the Hungarian scientific life. By the end of the examined decade, students graduating from Pécs had already appeared in institutes and clinics, and despite the economic difficulties, the number of medical faculty units also increased.¹

¹ A more detailed overview is unnecessary due to a number of prior works on the subject. In general: *Szabó, Pál*: A M. kir. Erzsébet Tudományegyetem és irodalmi munkássága. Pécs, 1940.; *Benke, József*: Egyetemünk története. Pécs, 2000. 69–242.; *Schmelczner-Pohánka, Éva – Lengvári, István*: The Hungarian Royal Erzsébet University. In: Fedeles, Tamás – Lengvári, István et al.: Centuries of Higher Education in Pécs. Pécs, 2017. 35–49. On the expulsion from Pozsony: *Popély, Gyula*: A pozsonyi Erzsébet Tudományegyetem végnapjai az impériumváltás után. In: A Kárpát-medence vonzásában. Tanulmányok Polányi Imre emlékére. Edited: Fischer, Ferenc – Hegedűs, Katalin et al. Pécs,

The archival sources used

In the 19–20th centuries, the most important sources for university students are semester enrolment forms and diploma books. Of course, other surveys and records on academic progress, student welfare, and other topics have also survived. While the latter are fragmented, the former are available in their entirety from the beginning for the Erzsébet University.² Between 2004 and 2007, a database containing the data of the medical students' enrolment forms and diploma books was created at the University Archives of the University of Pécs. After merging the archival sources into a single database, a single record contains all the data for an individual student.³ In the database, we have always assigned all available data to the data of the graduates. Our current study examines the period from the start of the university to the end of the 1929/1930 academic year, and includes only graduates of medical degrees, i.e. those who have not completed their studies or who have only completed a few semesters at the faculty are excluded.

Number of students, ratio of men to women

From the beginnings in Pozsony to the 1944/1945 academic year, there were 2,267 graduates, of whom 419 were women. The distribution by academic year is shown in the following table:

Table 1: Number of students based on degrees awarded

Academic year	Number of students, total	Women	%
1918-19	14	2	14.3
1919-20	4	0	0
1920-21	12	0	0
1921-22	75	14	18.7
1922-23	104	13	12.5
1923-24	169	34	20.1
1924-25	122	32	26.2
1925-26	120	24	20.0
1926-27	209	68	32.5
1927-28	148	49	33.1
1928-29	111	22	19.8
1929-30	109	25	22.9
1930-31	68	12	17.6
1931-32	80	9	11.3
1932-33	60	5	8.3

2001. 379–394.; *Lengvári, István*: Az Erzsébet Tudományegyetem alapítása, a pozsonyi és budapesti évek története. *Per Aspera Ad Astra* 1. (2014):1. 15–25. On the relationship between the city of Pécs and the university see: *Rozs, András*: Pécs a befogadó város. In: 80 éve Pécssett. A város és egyeteme. Edited: Nagy, Ferencné – Vonyó, József. Pécs, 2003. 35–48.; *Lengvári, István*: A város és az „árva leány” – Pécs és az Erzsébet Tudományegyetem. *Limes* (2004):4 (Városfejlődés Trianon után II.) 83–92.

² Pécsi Tudományegyetem (Pécs University, hereinafter PTE) Egyetemi Levéltár (University Archive, hereinafter EL), VIII.105.d. Erzsébet Tudományegyetem (Erzsébet University, hereinafter ETE), Orvostudományi Kar (Medical Faculty, hereinafter OtK), Iratkozási lapok, diplomakönyvek. (Enrolment forms, diploma books).

³ These are the following (in addition to archival identification and description data): name, religion, date and place of birth, name of father/guardian and their occupation and place of residence, name of secondary school, semesters when the student was enrolled, previous higher education and other notes (e.g. students' associations memberships). We did not include the list of registered courses.

1933-34	55	6	10.9
1934-35	71	8	11.27
1935-36	89	9	10.1
1936-37	57	7	12.3
1937-38	74	10	13.5
1938-39	88	10	11.4
1939-40	72	10	13.9
1940-41	52	10	19.2
1941-42	52	8	15.4
1942-43	55	6	10.9
1943-44	48	7	14.6
1944-45	149	19	12.8
total	2,267	419	18.5

As enrolment in Pozsony only happened for the upper years, this somewhat distorts the number of graduates in the first few years. The second academic year in Budapest and the restart in Pécs show an increase and stabilization in the number of students. The reason for the decline observed in the late 1920s (which occurred not only in the medical faculties) was that the government sought to reduce the number of admissible students.

Religious composition

Based on the data taken from the diploma books and the enrolment forms, the religious distribution in the examined period shows the following figures:

Table 2: Religious distribution of medical graduates by the end of the 1929/1930 academic year

Religion	Number of students	%
Roman Catholic	222	18.56
Greek Orthodox	4	0.33
Lutheran	26	2.17
Calvinist	58	4.85
Unitarian	3	0.25
Israelite	775	64.80
N/A	108	9.03
total	1,196	100

The table demonstrates well that, in terms of the total population, Jewish graduates are significantly overrepresented, while Christian students are underrepresented. It is also interesting to observe the change in the proportion of Israelite graduates during the period. While this figure is 75.48% during the 1918/1919 – 1922/1923 academic years, it is down to 60.77% in the 1926/1927, and 41.28% in the 1929/1930 academic year. The decrease in this indicator can already be attributed to the effect of *numerus clausus*. The number of Jewish students studying at the Erzsébet University was also outstanding on a national level: according to the calculations of Viktor Karády, 43% of all Israelite students in Hungary studied in Pécs in the academic year 1921/1922 while 29% in 1924/25.⁴

⁴ Karády, Viktor: The restructuring of the academic market place in Hungary. In: The numerus clausus in Hungary. Studies on the First Anti-Jewish Law and Academic Anti-Semitism in Modern Central Europe. Edited: Karády, Viktor – Nagy, Péter Tibor. Budapest, 2012. 128. Table III.

Distribution by place of birth

The distribution of the 1,196 graduates by place of birth can be considered even, but there are surprisingly few students from South Transdanubia. Baranya County had 58 (4.85%), Somogy 37 (3.10%) and Tolna 26 (2.17%) people based on their place of birth. Pécs, the seat of the University, contributed only 28 graduates. Among the Transdanubian counties, Vas and Zala had 16-16 (1.34%) and Veszprém 21 (1.76%) students. Excluding Budapest, Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun County stands out due to its size, with 99 (8.28%) graduates. (It should be noted that Újpest, for example, was not yet part of the capital at that time.) Based on the place of birth, most students came from Budapest (309 students, 25.83%). In principle, the place of residence of the father/guardian at the time of enrolment was also recorded in the enrolment forms, but only for a part of the students, 876 people. Based on this, we know of 340 students (38.81%) whose father/guardian lived in Budapest during their university studies. Between 1920 and 1930, Budapest made up 15-16% of Hungary's population, so students from Budapest were clearly overrepresented. Returning to the birth data, the religious distribution of the 309 graduates from Budapest is as follows:

Table 3: Religious distribution of medical graduates born in Budapest by the end of the 1929/1930 academic year

Religion	Number of students	%
Roman Catholic	43	13.92
Lutheran	6	1.94
Calvinist	12	3.88
Israelite	227	73.46
N/A	21	6.80
total	309	100

The background of the process is well known from the literature:⁵ Jewish students tried to gain admission to rural institutions from Budapest universities, which strictly adhered to the provisions laid out in *numerus clausus*.

Social background

Unfortunately, the occupation of the father (guardian) was not provided in all cases, and this field can only be found in the enrolment forms. The data of a total of 901 students are available, representing 75.33% of the students examined. As in almost all eras and types of schools, we can state that the completion of this field is the most irregular, the most inaccurate – as the data were recorded on the basis of what information the students provided either orally, or in writing in the forms. The sometimes arbitrary categorisation by researchers, for example, obscures the problem that there can be huge differences in income and wealth behind an occupational classification. Our classification below is primarily based on the occupational structure:⁶

⁵ Karady, Victor: The restructuring... 127–129; Kovács M., Mária: Törvénytől sújtva. A numerus clausus Magyarországon, 1920–1945. Budapest, 2012. 141–149.

⁶ For this see: Tóth, Zoltán: Társadalmi státusz és foglalkozás az osztrák és magyar társadalomstatistikában. Statisztikai Szemle 65. (1987) 67–87.

Table 4: Occupation of father/guardian (only taking into account the completed data sets)

Father/guardian's occupation	Number of students	%
Self-employed, landlord, landowner	58	6.44
Public and private official	200	22.20
Professional	195	21.64
Trader, large business owner	247	27.41
Craftsman, small business owner	114	12.65
Clerk, assistant, employee	60	6.66
Smallholder, agricultural labourer, factory worker	24	2.66
Pensioner, refugee	3	0.33
total (completed data sets)	901	100

In the course of the categorization, data from all completed fields were recorded. Where the father/guardian retired during the student's studies, we also categorized them according to their former occupation, leaving us with only two "retired" entries without further information. In the first category (self-employed, landlord, landowner), we included all data that clearly indicated the occupation. Among private and public officials we have included all officials, whether they were employed at banks, mines, public administration or the Hungarian State Railway Company. Regardless of their occupation, we included doctors, teachers and those with a degree in law (judges, prosecutors, lawyers) as professionals. Teachers who also acted as school headmasters were added to this category, but also a doctor who worked as a chief medical officer. While the classification of the craftsman – small business owner – smallholder category was clear, in the trader – large business owner category we could not take into account the different financial statuses covered by the term "trader." Further research could determine the size of the business only on an individual basis (if data is available) for the over 200 fathers/guardians categorised as "trader." The clerk – assistant – employee field includes all occupations performed without a higher education qualification, as an employee (including salesmen, for example, in addition to the named ones). We also classified the small number of data registered as smallholders in the category of smallholder – agricultural labourer.

The obtained results show that the supply of doctors from Pécs came mainly from a background of officials, large business owners/traders and professionals. This is mainly due to the fact that, in addition to the reproduction of the professions over generations, few have been able to afford the costs of training (tuition, housing in another city, travel, etc.). Representatives of the medical profession as fathers/guardians were represented with 71 people (7.88%; including dentists but not veterinarians). Regarding the religious composition of the occupation of father/guardian categories, 116 (59.49%) Israelites and 54 (27.69%) Roman Catholics make up the majority of professionals, followed by Calvinists (17; 8.72%), Lutherans (6; 3.08%) and Unitarians (2; 1.03%). The representation of office workers is similar with 108 (54%) Israelites, 75 (37.5%) Roman Catholic fathers/guardians; the additional figures here are 1 Greek Catholic, 12 Calvinists and 4 Lutherans. We see quite different numbers in the religious distribution of the trader/large business owner category, with 92.31% (228) Israelites, 4.86% (12) Roman Catholics, 5 Calvinists (2.02%) and 1 (0.40%) Lutheran.

Numerus clausus and the university in Pécs

As it can be seen from the tables above, the proportion of graduates of the Israelite religion is far greater than that of other denominations. The reasons for this, of course, cannot be examined without taking into consideration the provision that had the greatest impact on higher education in the era: the law known as *numerus clausus*. Law 1920/XXV determined the number of students in higher education according to the proportions of ethnicities, and also defined Judaism as an “ethnic race”. As the proportion of Jews in the total population was around 6%, while this figure reached 25% among university students before the First World War, for them *numerus clausus* definitely meant being displaced from higher education, but beyond that it caused disenfranchisement and stalled previous emancipation processes. Partly as a result of international pressure, Law 1928/XIV amended this: the section on the proportion of ethnicities was removed.⁷

On 19 October 1920, at the first meeting of the academic year, the councils of the universities of Kolozsvár and Pozsony, temporarily co-operating in Budapest at the time, were forced to deal with the situation in the capital. The Faculty of Medicine in Budapest incorrectly applied the provisions of *numerus clausus* to the upper-year students as well, thus removing 1,600 medical students from the Faculty, most of whom were of Jewish origin. If the refugee universities had done the same, their upper years would have been depopulated, and at a time when they were exposed to the attack of the University of Budapest, which questioned the necessity of two state-operated medical faculties in Budapest. Finally, the two universities decided to admit or transfer the candidates who applied on time from the University of Budapest, and thus – amidst intensifying political actions and provocations – they would try to defend their institutions.⁸

Even after the move to Pécs, the circumstances did not change significantly. József Halasy-Nagy, the rector of the 1923/1924 academic year, described the situation as follows: “*Students who were displaced from the University of Budapest or those who sought a cheaper living came to Pécs. The Faculty therefore had a specific interpretation of numerus clausus. It interpreted that if e.g. the ministerial permission allowed the enrolment of 100 students for the first year, but only 40 Christians applied, then filling in the places allowed the admission of 60 Jews alongside them. Thus, the Medical Faculty of the university in Pécs became a national refuge for Jewish youth, and Jewish doctors graduating from foreign universities also tried to naturalise their degrees here.*”⁹

The latter processes strengthened after the move to Pécs, and students and their organisations tried to achieve a stricter interpretation of the law by submitting petitions in addition to several symbolic measures.¹⁰ The university council rejected some of these, but also appealed to the

⁷ In summary: Szegvári, Katalin: Numerus clausus rendelkezések az ellenforradalmi Magyarországon. Budapest, 1988.; Kovács M., Mária: A numerus clausus Magyarországon: 1919–1945. In: Jogfosztás – 90 éve. Tanulmányok a numerus claususról. Edited: Molnár, Judit. Budapest, 2011. 29–59.; Kovács M., Mária: Törvénytől sújtva...; Kovács, M., Mária: The Hungarian numerus clausus: ideology, apology and history, 1919–1945. In: The numerus clausus in Hungary... 27–55. On the amendment of the law see: Barta, Róbert: A numerus clausus törvény módosítása 1928-ban. In: Történeti tanulmányok I. A KLTE Történelmi Intézetének kiadványa. Debrecen 1992. 113–124.; Ladányi, Andor: On the 1928 amendment to the Hungarian numerus clausus act. In: The numerus clausus in Hungary... 69–111.

⁸ PTE EL VIII.1.a. ETE, A Pécsi Egyetem Tanácsának ülésjegyzőkönyvei (Records of University Council, hereinafter ET-jkv) 1920.10.19. (joint session), agenda item #1.

⁹ Halasy-Nagy, József: Summa vitae. Önéletrajzi vázlat. A Móra Ferenc Múzeum Évkönyve: Studia Historiae Literarum et Artium, 2. Szeged, 1999. 229.

¹⁰ A detailed description and interpretation of these are beyond the scope of this study. See: Lengvári, István: A pécsi jogi kar véleménye a numerus clausus törvény végrehajtásáról (1924). In: A történelem szálai. Tanulmánykötet Vonyó József 65. születésnapjára. Edited: Fischer, Ferenc – Hegedűs, Katalin – Rab, Virág. Pécs, 2010. 311–320.; Paksy, Zoltán: The Implementation of the Hungarian Numerus Clausus Act at the University of Pécs in the 1920s. Diké 3. (2019):2. 100–106.; Paksy, Zoltán: A numerus clausus és a pécsi egyetem. In: Tanulmányok a magyarországi

Ministry of Religion and Public Education to clarify by decree the details of compliance with the *numerus clausus* law.¹¹

In the 1920s, the Faculty of Medicine had various options to counteract the decline in student numbers. One of these was the admission of foreign students of the Israelite religion, on which in December 1926 even the Minister of Religion and Public Education sought the opinion of the faculty. At that time, the faculty took the position that a foreign citizen should not have more rights than a Hungarian, so it rejected the proposal.¹² The University Council also accepted this opinion, in opposition to the contrary view of the Faculty of Humanities.¹³ However, in September 1927, the ministry decided that vacancies could also be filled by foreign citizens,¹⁴ but this did not result in a significant increase in student numbers.

The other solution was playing with the numbers of admissible students, as mentioned by Halasy-Nagy. In September 1926, it was decided that in the case of first year students, everyone who could be admitted by law would be enrolled, and even in the case of withdrawals, the applications of additional students were accepted. In the case of senior students, the faculty decided to “*admit all students with acquired rights [...] as in the last two years the faculty determined the proportion of first-year Jewish students at the time not according to the number of students allowed, but according to the number of students actually enrolled. In accordance with the provisions set out in the ministerial decree recently published, the Faculty decided to admit eight Jewish senior medical students for the purpose of compensating for the difference between the two figures.*”¹⁵ Incidentally, an additional 90 applicants of Jewish descent wanted to gain admission in that semester.¹⁶

The clear goal of the university management was to ensure the survival of the university by increasing the number of students. The main reason for applying *numerus clausus* as loosely as possible was also the fact that the number of Christian students remained low, often failing to fill in the allotted numbers. This is also described by Halasy-Nagy in his memoirs,¹⁷ supported by the opinion of Ferenc Vasváry, Dean of the Faculty of Law.¹⁸

However, a more permissive legal interpretation by the universities of Pécs and other rural universities could not have worked without the ministry and even the government turning a blind eye, or even supporting it. This practice could later be used well in diplomacy as well: in 1921, when the law was examined by the People’s Federation, the Hungarian government was able to successfully respond to the attacks by presenting the student body compositions of the universities in Pécs and in Szeged. As mentioned above, with the 1928 amendment to the law, the limitations in principle were removed, but the number of graduates (as it can be seen in Table 1) began to decline rapidly. The government’s support for the return of students of rural universities to Budapest may have played a role in this: Kunó Klebelsberg, Minister of Religion and Public Education, in a letter to the Erzsébet University in September 1929,¹⁹ described his decree that all students who had not been admitted to the Pázmány Péter University in

zsidóság történetéből. Edited: Fazekas, Csaba. Budapest, 2019. 121–139.; *Raposa, Vivien Kitti*: A pécsi bajtársiak antiszemita beiratkozási sztrájkja az 1933/34-es tanévben. Per Aspera Ad Astra 7. (2020):1. 71–99.

11 PTE EL VIII.101.a. ETE, ET-jkv, 1924.01.30. agenda item #20.

12 PTE EL VIII.105.a. ETE, OtK Kari ülési jegyzőkönyvek (Records of Faculty Council, hereinafter KT-jkv), 1926.12.20. agenda item #10.

13 PTE EL VIII.101.a. ETE, ET-jkv, 1927.03.30. agenda item #21.

14 PTE EL VIII.105.a. ETE, OtK KT-jkv, 1927.09.16. agenda item #24.

15 PTE EL VIII.105.a. ETE, OtK KT-jkv, 1926.09.24. agenda item #21.

16 PTE EL VIII.105.a. ETE, OtK KT-jkv, 1926.09.07. agenda item #32.

17 *Halasy-Nagy, József*: Summa vitae... 229.

18 PTE EL VIII.104.a. ETE, Jog és Államtudományi Kar (Faculty of Law and Political Sciences, hereinafter JÁK), KT-jkv, 1924.01.28. agenda item #13. Vasváry’s opinion published by: *Lengvári, István*: A pécsi jogi kar... 318–319.

19 PTE EL VIII.104.c. ETE, JÁK, Nem iktatott iratok. (Non-registered files.) VKM 410-5-119-1928,

Budapest in previous years, and whose parents had a permanent address in Budapest, would be eligible for transfer.²⁰

Further research opportunities

In order to draw further conclusions on a national level, it is necessary that after acquiring and analysing data sets of other medical faculties, we should be able to analyse the differences of the student bodies of various institutions, as well as the transfers between them using uniform data series. Other documents related to student advancement (admission and complex examination records) allow for more detailed and in-depth analyses, which can be supplemented with, for example, matriculation results, which contain information for an even longer period of time.²¹ Recollections can help us map out the enrolment strategy of a family or social group. The completed databases²² can also be of great help in answering such questions as changing religion, refining the ranking of secondary schools, examining the intellectual elite,²³ researching the catchment area of Hungarian cities and regions, or the impact of transport infrastructure on university commute.²⁴ Finally, it is essential to examine the further individual careers of graduates, no matter how difficult this is, or how little quantitative result it yields.²⁵

²⁰ The University Council did not discuss the decree.

²¹ See, for example, *Miklós Zeidler's* research on this, for which only one report is available: <https://tti.btk.mta.hu/esemenyek/eloadas-vitaules/2187-beszamolo-zeidler-miklos-eloadasarol.html> [31.12.2020]

²² More recently, *The impact of on Trianon on Hungarian higher education* research project by the Veritas Institute (led by *Gábor Ujváry*), previously in the framework of historical elite research programmes led by *Viktor Karády*.

²³ See primarily the research of *Gábor I. Kovács*.

²⁴ For this, see for example: *Fekete, Szabolcs*: A pécsi egyetem bölcsész-diplomásainak rekrutációja 1921–1940. (Szociológiai dolgozatok 2.) Budapest 2012. 110–114.

²⁵ For individual careers of the graduates of the medical faculty in Pécs, see *Lengvári, István*: A pécsi Magyar Királyi Erzsébet Tudományegyetem Orvostudományi Karának női hallgatói (1919–1945). In: *Parasztok és polgárok. Tanulmányok Tóth Zoltán 65. születésnapjára*. Edited: Czocho, Gábor – Horváth, Gergely Krisztián – Pozsgai, Péter. Budapest, 2008. 402–403.; *Lengvári, István*: Somogyi hallgatók a pécsi Magyar Királyi Erzsébet Tudományegyetem Orvostudományi Karán, 1919–1945. In: *Szorosadtól Rijekáig. Tanulmányok Bősze Sándor emlékére*. Edited: Mayer, László – Tilcsik, György. Budapest, 2015. 227–228.