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Clientele vs. Status Seeking? Subject Field Choice in Higher Education in the Hungarian-Romanian Cross-border Region

Adrian HATOS[1]

Abstract

The article presents the results of testing several hypotheses related to the issue of impact of differentiation inspired by the model of Effectively Maintained Inequality using data from the survey done in the spring of 2012 among students from the Romanian-Hungarian cross-border region. The multinomial logistic regressions of subject-field enrollment in two public universities from the cross-border region confirm most of our expectations based on the theses of the Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI) in the case of the large public University of Debrecen (Hungary) – social reproduction effects in case of the most lucrative specialties of Law and Medicine but less support for the hypotheses in the case of the University of Oradea (large public university in Romania). The lack of confirmation of EMI hypotheses in Romania suggests a possible and plausible consequence of expansion in clientele-oriented university systems: a decrease of contribution of higher education to social reproduction.

Keywords: massification of higher education, differentiation of higher education, effectively maintained inequality.

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Introduction

The last decades made us witnesses two important developments in the area of higher education: a worldwide dramatic expansion of enrollment figures, and significant changes in the organizational structures and governance policies of post-secondary education in almost all regions of the world including Central and Eastern Europe (Baker 2015; Kwiek 2013; Usher, 2009). By 2006 both Romania and Hungary have reached GER above 50% qualifying their higher education system as universal (Usher 2009). As the contraction started only in 2009-2010, by 2012 the institutional settings and the student body in both countries reflected almost unchanged the marks of the period of increases. The massification was paralleled by structural changes in the national higher education systems (Guri-Rosenblit, Sebkova & Teichler 2007) a flourishing of novel structures in the higher education landscape following decades of tight state control over enrollments and academic governance (Pusztai & Szabo 2008; Dobbins and Knill 2009; Pachuashvili 2011).

In the Northern Hungarian-Romanian cross-border region restructuring of higher education systems involved on the one hand the establishment of new universities: public tertiary institutions, as well as the establishment of private ones. Moreover, older universities often suffered processes of restructuring, as was the case of the University of Debrecen, which has its actual organization since 2000 when three prior existing universities in Debrecen merged. In addition, many new fields of study were added to the existing ones.

All the occurred expansion is typically expected to contribute to an increase in the access to higher education for those from the disadvantaged classes. Although the enrollment numbers skyrocketed during the last decades, inequalities of access remained the same either in the Western industrialized societies or in the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe (Konstantinovskiy 2012, Hatos 2014; Hatos 2012; Mare 1980; Matiju, Rehakova and Simonova 2003; Matiju and Smith 2009; Nieuwbeerta 1996; Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Simonova 2003; Treiman, Ganzeboom and Rijken 2003). According to Lucas (2001) horizontal differentiation of higher education could contribute to the maintain of inequalities. Following this topic, this paper will focus mainly on analyzing the correlations between the indicators of students' socio-economic status and their current enrollment status in specific subject field in the two public universities from the cross-border area of Hungary and Romania, considering the different patterns of higher education differentiation between the two countries and their possible effects on social reproduction through universities.

Literature review

Diversification and opportunity of access: the effectively maintained inequality hypothesis

According to the theory of Maximally Maintained Inequality (Hanley & McKeever 1997; Raftery & Hout 1993) the saturated access in absolute numbers to certain educational levels have the consequence of actually increasing the demand for superior certificates in the case of those endowed with the best resources. However, testing the Maximally Maintained Inequality model in Ireland, Lucas (2001) has shown that instead of demand for higher level certificates, candidates from the privileged classes can reorient to certain fields from the respective level for which saturation occurred apparently. Graduating from certain tertiary institutions or subject fields from the same level becomes an instrument of social reproduction.

Thus, subject fields within the same university can be expected to play different roles in class reproduction, more specifically in relation with the various abilities, aspirations and resources of the students. This is evident if we think that: 1) the social and economic rewards of fields of study are different, with medical and law studies situated usually on top; 2) the costs of pursuing higher education are not equal for all students and for all fields (with Medical studies and Architecture having usually the longest study programs), nor for all universities – which make local or regional universities more attractive to the students from the poorer social categories.

Although both differentiated and stratified, Romania and Hungary have yet different structures of higher education. These differences fit the dichotomy between status-seeking (where selective universities and non-tuition paying enrollment predominate) vs. client-seeking universities (the contrasting case) (Shavit *et al.*, 2007). In Hungary the ratio of private to public university students never exceeded 17% while in Romania at its peak (2009) was 77%. The growing demand for tertiary education in Hungary was met primarily in the nineties by an increasing number of public universities. This proliferation was reversed though by legal means in 1999 when the number of the public universities shrank from 55 to 30, especially via mergers (Morgan 2015). Thus, the lower tier of universities in Hungary contains now especially smaller public universities (like the Nyregyhazi College). Noteworthy, in the public sector the proportion of tuition paying students is much larger in Romania than in Hungary. Apparently, the Hungarian university landscape is one dominated by status-seeking, where recognition is the most important and sought upon asset while the Romanian universities are first competing for students, even at the expense of selectivity or quality indicators.

An investigation of the social background of students in the case of Romanian and Hungarian universities is necessary as the recent decline in enrollment show that the demand for higher education became saturated in both countries and, therefore, a pressure towards more differentiation across universities and fields of study is predicted by the theory of effectively maintained inequality. Following the hypotheses of Shavit and his collaborators one can expect that the more status-seeking systems and universities (the Hungarian ones) to display more indices of social reproduction when access is concerned and the more client-seeking ones (the Romanians) to be more equalitarian in this regard.

Other predictors of field choice: gender, ability and socio-economic status

There are still large *gender* differentials concerning program choice and access although evidence is rarer concerning university choice. Men are more likely than women to choose the more lucrative fields (Ayalon & Yogev 2005; Davies & Guppy 1996; Goyette & Mullen 2006) while other fields are more feminized (like social science and education) but it is not clear if this is the case because of the abilities involved by the fields or because of the lower pay entailed (England *et al.*, 2007). Among the vocational fields, Engineering is obviously the best rewarded and also the most masculine (Goyette & Mullen 2006).

University candidates and their parents choose the university and the field of study according to rational deliberations which consider the chances of admission and those of successful graduation (Ayalon & Yogev 2005; Davies & Guppy 1996; Van de Werfhorst, Sullivan & Cheung 2003; Lucas 2001). In addition, an analysis of subjective probabilities of success in higher education while strongly predicted by previous results is also dependent on social class and gender (Tolsma, Need & De Jong 2010). Therefore one can expect that the more selective/rewarding fields of study will demand more *ability* from their candidates and vice versa.

It seems that candidates from the privileged classes (high *SES*) are more likely to enroll in the professional fields of Law and Medicine while students coming from the working classes are more likely to enroll in the fields of Engineering (Van de Werfhorst, Sullivan & Cheung 2003) or in Arts and Sciences (Ayalon & Yogev 2005; Goyette & Mullen 2006). Davis and Guppy (1996) and Van de Werfhorst (2002) show that youth from lower SES backgrounds tend more to enroll in the also materially rewarding vocational and technological fields. Moreover, it is a general conclusion that the expansion and differentiation of higher education has increased the likelihood of graduating social science and education programs for those coming from the underprivileged categories.

All the above correlations are variants of the so-called 'differential advantage hypothesis' (Goyette and Mullen 2006) according to which descendants from the advantaged classes are better endowed with the so-called social skills and cultural capital granting them generally better performance especially in the less vocational fields of study (Arts, Sciences, Law and Medicine). Labaree (1997), stressed that higher status youth choose domains with high exchange value while those from the working class prefer fields with immediate use value. This is a consequence of the superior social and cultural skills in the privileged families which assure better occupational rewards in professional jobs.

Hypotheses

From the above described literature and the Romanian-Hungarian context of higher education one can draw the following 4 hypotheses: (1) Social selectivity (class and educational effect in access to colleges and to specific fields of study) is more pronounced in the universities from the more status-seeking Hungarian system than in the university from the more client-seeking Romanian system; (2) Gender is related to enrollment in specific fields of study, especially Social Sciences, Humanities and Engineering in both countries; (3) Academic ability is positively related to enrollment in the most rewarding subject fields (i.e. Medicine and Law); (4) More students from the privileged strata are expected in the fields of Medicine, Law and Arts and Humanities and less in the areas of Science and Engineering which are more meritocratic and where performance is less dependent on cultural and social capital.

Research design, data and methods

The hypotheses that were drawn in the previous pages were tested using the data from the survey done within the HERD research project. The survey included 1451 BA students selected using a quota sampling procedures (quotas were proportional with cycle, year, faculty and type of financing) from University of Oradea (N=565) and University of Debrecen (N=886). Data were collected through self-completed questionnaires in the spring of 2012 (academic year 2011/2012). Weighing was not necessary to correct for sampling errors. As the dependent variable (subject field) is nominal, the hypotheses were tested using multinomial logistic regressions run at university level with enrollment in engineering as reference category.

Dependent variable: subject fields

In order to assure workable number of cases in each domain, fields of study have been recoded in 10 broad categories following various international classifications of fields of study.

Table 1. Distribution of BA students by subject fields in HERD survey

	University of Debrecen	University of Oradea
Arts and humanities (arts, history, philosophy, theology)	53	89
Health sciences (medicine, pharmacy)	208	67
Social sciences (sociology, political sciences, social work, psychology etc.)	33	25
Economy and business administration	151	49
Law and public administration	114	41
Natural sciences (biology, chemistry, mathematics, informatics, physics, geography)	120	41
Architecture and construction	76	43
Education and physical education	62	33
Agriculture and environment studies	17	102
Engineering	52	75
Total	886	565

Independent variables

Academic ability was measured via the proxy of count of academic prizes won during pre-tertiary education: prizes for scholar achievement, prizes in academic contests and prizes for arts or sports achievements, for grades 1-8 (primary and lower secondary) and 9-12 (upper secondary) separately. The six indicators correlate highly between each other (alpha>0.7).

Table 2. Average of academic ability by country

	Average academic achievement
Hungary	1.394
Romania	2.034

Because of estimation errors in the multivariate analyses father's occupation had to be dropped. Instead of occupation two other measures of background SES were used: parents' affluence and father's education measured in years. Parents' affluence was measured as a count of 6 valuable items likely to be found in the parents' household: own house, weekend house, plasma or LCD TV, PC or laptop with internet access, dishwashing machine, air conditioning, car, and smartphone.

Table 3. Mean of parent's affluence and father's education by country

	HU	RO
Affluence	3.98	3.43
Father's education (years)	12.67	12.73

Rural residence was also introduced in the models as an indicator of additional costs for pursuing higher education and of lower cultural and social abilities necessary to perform in specific institutions and fields of study.

Results

Subject field choice

The separate regressions for subject field choice within the two largest universities provide satisfying fit indicators, the pseudo-R^2 being especially large in the case of University of Oradea. A comparison of the logistic models for the two universities displays different co-variations of subject field - apart from the relationship with gender which is salient in both cases and which confirms our expectations in the most striking way.

Table 6. Odd-ratios (exp (b)) for specific subject fields by independent variables at the University of Debrecen (reference category=Engineering)

	Arts and humanities	Health sciences	Social sciences	Economy and business administration	Law and public administration	Natural sciences	Architecture and construction	Education and physical education	Agriculture and environment studies
Female	4.71***	8.79***	11.31***	2.50**	5.35***	3.04***	1.79	12.25***	2.97*
Rural	0.21**	0.79	1.10	0.68	1.18	1.57	0.81	0.52	0.43
Achievements	1.25*	1.14	0.92	1.19	1.19	1.21	1.05	0.99	1.37*
Fathers yrs of school	1.30***	1.23**	1.11	1.12	1.17*	1.12	1.11	0.99	0.90
Affluence of parents	0.78**	1.20*	1.00	1.06	1.24**	1.11	1.12	1.13	1.01

**p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01*

LR=181.94, p<0.01

Nagelkerke R^2=0.203

Table 7. Odd-ratios (exp(b)) for specific subject fields by independent variables at the University of Oradea (reference category=Engineering)

	Arts and humanities	Health sciences	Social sciences	Economy and business administration	Law and public administration	Natural sciences	Architecture and construction	Education and physical education	Agriculture and environment studies
Female	10.39***	11.52***	84.57****	18.14***	13.38***	17.41***	6.87***	254.43****	9.70***
Rural	1.73	2.00	2.30	1.91	2.57*	6.61****	0.44	2.78*	8.20***
Achievements	1.02	0.84	0.83	0.97	1.22*	1.08	1.06	0.68**	0.81**
Fathers yrs of school	1.03	1.01	0.74**	1.01	1.10	1.05	1.05	0.76**	1.00
Affluence of parents	1.00	1.00	1.37**	0.86	1.12	0.93	1.16	1.04	0.99

**p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01*

LR=244.91, p<0.01

Nagelkerke R2=0.364

One of the clearest determinants of variation of student population across departments and faculties is, in both universities, gender. In contrast with Engineering which has been used as the reference categories in the multinomial regressions, almost all fields seem feminized. The comparison of odds-ratios for Gender (female) by subject field (see *Figure 1*) between the two universities shows that gender contrast is more accentuated at the University of Oradea where, compared with Engineering, all the other specialties have higher odds-ratios for girls than in the case of University of Debrecen. The numbers are exceptionally high in the case of Social Sciences and Education where the odd-ratios for Oradea suggest clearly opposing gender ratios: while in Engineering male predominate in these two fields male are hard to find. A peculiarity of University of Debrecen (or of University of Oradea by contrast) is a gender ratio similar to that found for Engineering in the case of Architecture and Agriculture.

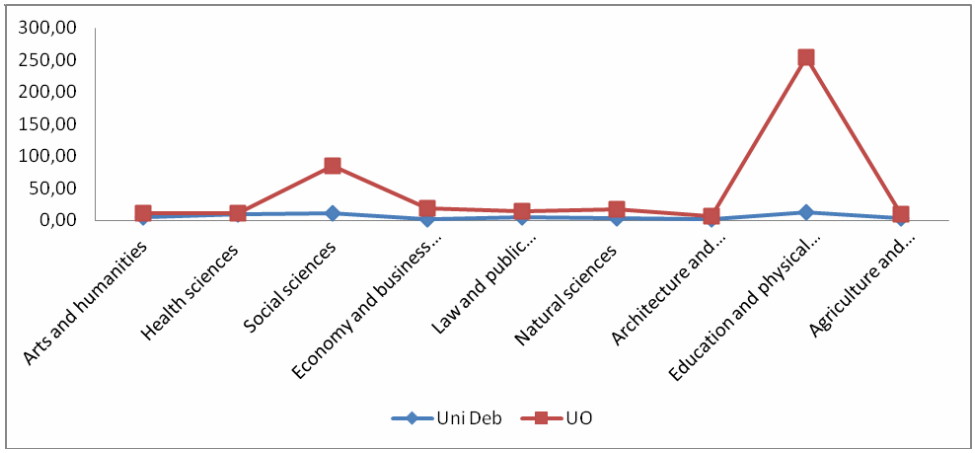

Figure 1. *Odd-ratios for variable Female by subject field (reference category=Engineering)*

In case of University of Debrecen we find the clearest confirmation of our hypotheses. Two important conclusions can be drawn in this case. First, Arts and Humanities are at the greatest social distance from Engineering: compared to the technical-vocational tertiary education, Arts and Humanities are preferred by significantly larger numbers of candidates which are of urban origin (see *Figure 2*), and come with background rich in educational capital (*Figure 4*) but poor in material resources (*Figure 5*) being themselves high achievers (*Figure 3*) in the primary and secondary school. Pursuing Artistic and Humanistic education at the University of Debrecen appears as a way of preserving status position for descendants of an educated urban middle class, most probably the intellectuals, if we consider the lack of material resources.

Second, in a subtle contrast with this regularity regarding the intergenerational transmission of status via subject field choice and in convergence with the proposed hypotheses are the positive parameters of educational and class effects in the case of the two professions with highest social rewards: Health sciences and Law. The significantly positive parameters of father's education (Figure 4) and parents' affluence (*Figure 5*) are consonant with our expectation that offspring of the higher classes and status groups will choose these highly selective and rewarding fields as means to preserve their positions of origin. Within the upper status groups of the society represented by students of the University of Debrecen the contrasts in strategies of social mobility are clear: while the lower strata of the middle class (non-affluent intellectuals) choose fields in which they can best make use of their cultivated background, the upper strata prefers the most selective and lucrative fields which, in the terms of Labaree (1997), both have high use-value and high exchange value on the labor market.

The model for University of Oradea displays a less clear picture, perhaps because rural background mediates or hides the effect of other variables. Romania, and the region participating in the region also, has a much larger share of rural population than Hungary, this feature being associated with a predominance of manual occupations, low education and low income. This justifies the positive significant effect of rural background for almost half of the subject fields that were compared with Engineering. This is especially the case for Natural Sciences and, even more, Agriculture and Environment while the significance tests for Law and Education are less conclusive. Choice for Natural Sciences and Agriculture and Environment of rural youth suggest a rational choice, similar to the 'relative advantage model': youth with less cultivated backgrounds choose fields of study culturally closer to their *habitus*.

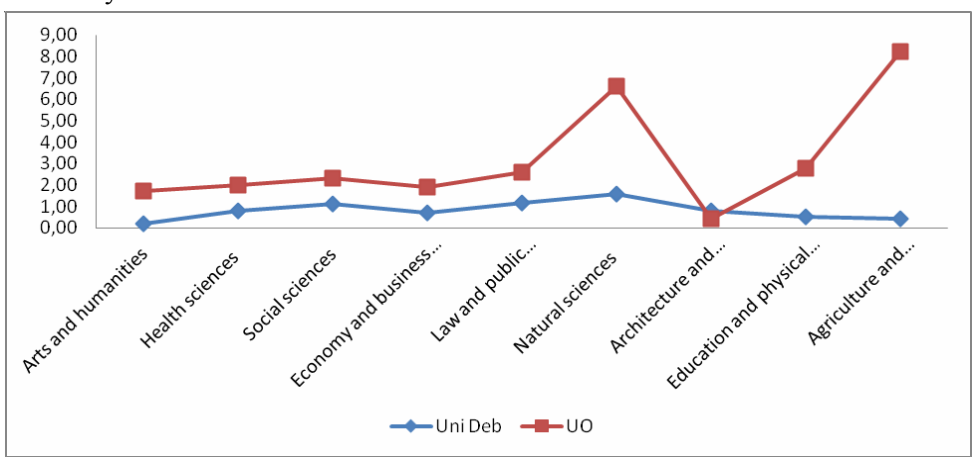

Figure 2. Odd-ratios for variable Rural by subject field (reference category= Engineering)

Four fields of study stand out against the baseline of Engineering at the University of Oradea: Social Sciences, Law and Administration, Education and Agriculture. More or less surprisingly, Arts and Humanities, Health Sciences, Economy and Architecture, and in a lesser degree Natural Sciences, seem only to be feminized alternatives of Engineering. Stated simply: the average boys choose Engineering while the average girls choose one of the listed fields. Then come the significant variations: 1) low achieving rural girls from low educated families choose Education while those with a similar rural background and little achievement but with better educated parents opt for Agriculture and Environment; 2) girls from low educated backgrounds but with good material standing choose Social Sciences; 3) high achieving girls with rural background choose Law. Apparent in the model is the importance of ability that reflects, probably the selectivity of the field: high achievers opt for Law while low achievers choose Education and Agriculture.

To synthesize the findings for the University of Oradea, it is apparent that the fields of study are primarily differentiated by gender, by residence and by ability. These criteria reflect on the one hand, gender stereotyping of specific occupation (most notably in the field of Engineering, Social Science and Education) and the maximization of chances of graduation and social attainment for youth from culturally deprived contexts (i.e. rural residence) which overlap apparently with the decision for the least selective fields in the case of the low achieving candidates (see *Figures 7* and *8*). Contrary to our expectations, educational capital and social class do not explain enrollment in peculiar fields except for Social Sciences and Education: youth from low status groups (fathers with low education) opt for Social Sciences and Education, which appear as easy solutions for upward social mobility.

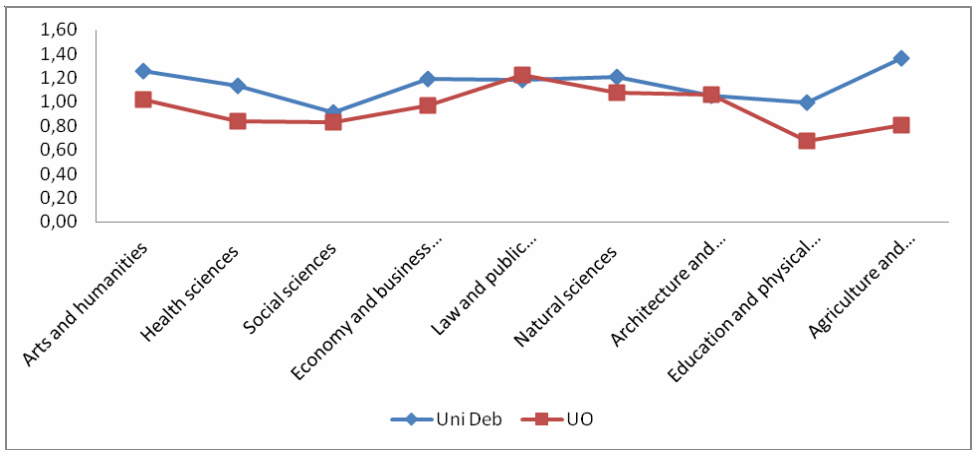

Figure 3. Odd-ratios for variable Achievement by subject field (reference category= Engineering)

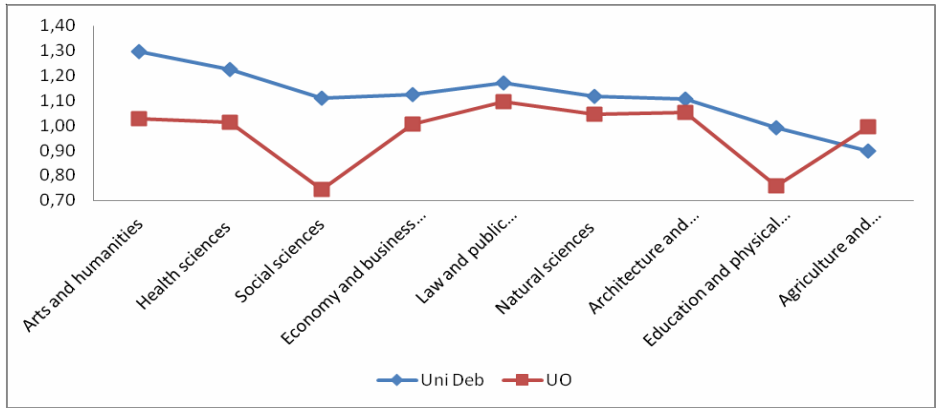

Figure 4. Odd-ratios for variable Father's years of education by subject field (reference category=Engineering)

The effects in the case of Education and Physical Education (81% of students in this category are studying Pedagogy or related disciplines) are most dramatic and reflect most notably that jobs in this field are seen as of low status and unattractive seen as solutions for status preservation or improvement in the strata which are most deprived of all resources necessary to perform in the higher education: academic ability, educational capital and cultural capital.

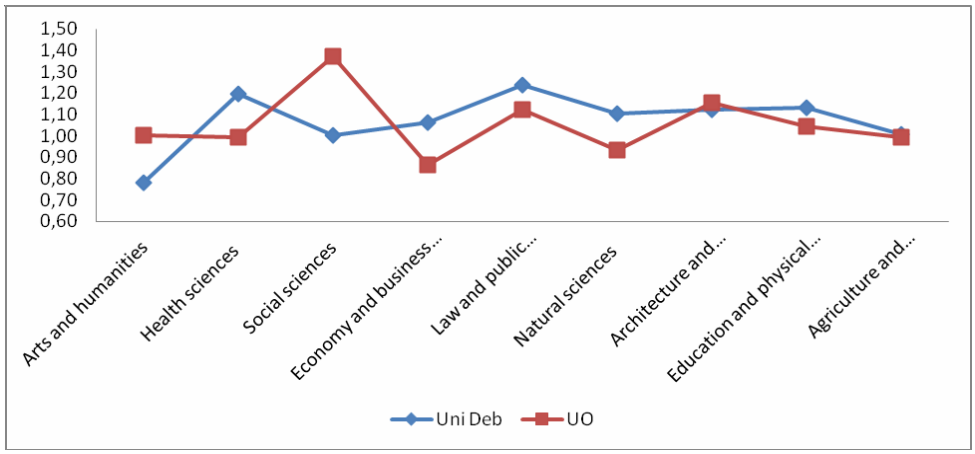

Figure 5. Odd-ratios for variable Parents' Affluence by subject field (reference category=Engineering)

Discussions and conclusions

The paper attempts to investigate several hypotheses concerning the horizontal differentiation of higher education institutions (in this case University of Oradea and University of Debrecen), between fields of study, in the Romanian-Hungarian cross border area. While the increase in probabilities of access to higher education in absolute numbers is out of any doubts, all the relevant empirical findings give less optimist answers to the issue of social justice (Hatos 2014; Hatos 2012; Konstantinovskiy 2012; Matiju, Rehakova and Simonova 2003; Nieuwbeerta 1996). The hypotheses linking indicators of social background of students with the enrollment in subject fields have been proposed relying especially on the theoretical and empirical developments of the Effectively Maintained Inequality Model (Lucas 2001) and on Shavit et al's (2007) distinction between status and clientele seeking higher education systems.

Modeling enrollment by field of study at the BA level separately in the two public universities produced non-convergent results that greatly confirmed the

hypotheses and reflect the impact of differences in the structures of higher education systems in the two countries.

On the one hand, there is a clear confirmation of the hypotheses derived from the EMI-model in the case of University of Debrecen: besides the evidences of feminization of all subject fields compared with Engineering for several subject fields one has significant effects of background SES (parents' affluence and father's education). There is evidence that pursuing Artistic and Humanistic education at the University of Debrecen is a tool of preserving status position for descendants of the educated urban middle class, most probably the intellectuals. Convergent with the expectations based on the literature are the positive parameters of SES measures in the case of the two professions with highest social rewards: health sciences and law. Contrasting strategies of status attainment and/or preservation of members of different strata of the middle class can be discerned here: the lower strata (non-affluent intellectuals) choose fields in which they can best make use of their cultivated background whereas the upper strata prefers the most selective and lucrative fields which have both high use-value and high exchange value on the labor market Labaree (1997).

The most striking result obtained when modeling the placement into subject fields at the University of Oradea is the absence of education or class effect with the exception of Social Sciences and Education these fields being easy solutions for status preservation or upward mobility for candidates that are least endowed with resources necessary for performing in university: low academic ability, low educational capital and low cultural capital. Another result which stands out at the University of Oradea is the fact that odds-ratios for gender are significantly larger, but mainly in the case of Education and Social Sciences, compared with Engineering a dramatically male-dominated field, which warns us about the fact that jobs in these fields are seen as of low status and hardly retributive and also maybe strongly segregated by gender.

Compared to University of Debrecen, data for University of Oradea suggest that fields of study in the higher education are seen as of little use as tools for upward social mobility or status preservation. Such a conclusion is consonant with the negative evaluations of inflationary impact of massification of higher education and with the labeling of the Romanian higher education system as clientele-seeking in opposition with Hungarian one a more status-seeking one. In addition to this, compared to Hungary, the Romanian counties of the Romanian-Hungarian cross-border area are socially more diverse, inhabited by minorities like Hungarians and Evangelicals as well as a large rural population, all these categories suffering various forms of exclusion from higher education. The numerous local private universities are devoted largely to a religious and ethnic clientele masking thus the extension of opportunity to study in the tertiary education for underprivileged groups behind identity or religious politics.

Limitations

The main limitations of the present study are determined by the possible errors in the samples. Different student populations and variations in regulations concerning attendance across universities and countries can also correlate with these errors and exacerbate them. It is very likely that the data from Romanian under represent non-traditional (older, participating in the labor force) or underachieving students. At the University of Oradea we have tried to compensate for this error by designing the sample to be representative concerning the ratio of tuition paying/ non-tuition paying students. The other limitation is derived from the impossibility of using data on parents' occupation which would make possible to test more adequately the class effects on college and subject field enrollment.

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