

The Role of Trust Among University Students

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Abstract: The rapid pace of change in recent decades has led to significant transformations in the educational environment. This has encompassed institutional changes, as well as individuals' ability to adapt and the confidence placed in them. Based on the analysis of a questionnaire completed by 46 respondents, this study draws conclusions regarding the extent to which university students' trust in the institution and in one another is changing and how it is evolving. Based on this, it can be said that trust in the degree remains very high among students. Although a similar survey conducted in 2013 yielded slightly lower trust scores, this may be because that survey surveyed Hungarian students, whereas this survey primarily surveyed international students. The baseline trust, which may influence other factors, is likely the level of trust in people. When compared via correlation with other trust levels, it showed no significant result, as it is practically impossible to demonstrate a correlation between the two. Thus, it showed no connection with either institutional or general levels of trust in people.

Keywords: Trust, Education, university, institutions

1 Introduction

The rapid pace of change in recent decades has led to significant transformations in the educational environment. This has encompassed institutional changes, as well as individuals' ability to adapt and the confidence placed in them [1]. The global economic crisis of 2008 and the 2019–2020 COVID-19 pandemic have altered trust in colleges and social institutions and its level [2]. However, the level of trust is not influenced solely by the changing environment. Researchers have identified 37 characteristics that may influence the level and extent of trust. These characteristics contribute to both the acquisition and loss of trust. These characteristics can be categorized into Competence, Integrity, Affinity, and Non-personal factors. Traits such as cooperative and ethical behavior, academic skills, and higher grades are more common factors in building trust; that is, those who possess them appear in a better light in the eyes of others [3]. The definition of trust leads us in several directions. There is no consensus in the literature regarding the definition of trust. One definition follows the network model. According to this, trust can emerge in

shared social environments, institutions, or spaces where participants expect and hold others accountable for behaving in accordance with expectations. According to this definition, “trust exists not so much as a relationship between two individuals (who already know each other), but as a possibility between individuals insofar as they share and interact within a common social environment, institution, or space.” According to this definition, if students and teachers participate in shared programs that are meaningful to both of them, then trust between them can be built and strengthened [4]. Another definition is the belief-based approach, which can be traced back to Kumar’s 1996 work. According to him, trust is synonymous with reliability. Two main approaches can be identified: the trust-based and the risk-based perspectives. Kumar (1996) argues that trust can be stronger than fear, and therefore companies where parties trust one another generate higher profits, serve customers better, and are more adaptable [5]. According to Doney et al. (1998), trust is the sum of belief and expectations. It also involves the intention that the parties will act accordingly. Based on their findings, trust can reduce certain types of costs, helps build relationships between different partners, and can improve the quality of the relationship between managers and their subordinates [6]. According to the risk-based approach, as described by Das-Teng (2004), trust is a positive belief in the other party’s behavior, such that the other party will not act opportunistically should circumstances change in any way. Trust is risk-taking. It is related to risk-taking and willingness. When an individual perceives low risk, they are willing to approach the other party with trust [7]. Very often, an individual trusts another if the latter fulfills their obligations [8]. When we look at universities, the presence of trust has several positive effects. It fosters cooperation, raises standards, and increases motivation toward an academic career. Students’ trust in faculty and university administration has a positive and strong correlation with the fulfillment of their expectations regarding higher education—that is, with their level of satisfaction. However, the relationship is inverse with regard to their academic performance. Trust in teachers does not decline upon graduation [9,10]. The results show that skepticism and congruence significantly influence students’ level of trust, their social engagement, and their sense of social responsibility [11]. There is an inverse relationship between student loyalty and dropout rates. There is also a correlation between student trust and the university’s reputation; that is, dropout rates are lower at universities with a better reputation. Community projects, environmental sustainability programs, and a commitment to social causes can significantly contribute to improving an organization’s reputation [12]. Students’ trust in their peers is strongly linked to how much they identify with their school. It shows a strong, though weaker, correlation with their motivation to learn. These correlations persist even when teachers support them [13].

2 Data and methodology

We conducted a questionnaire survey at the Keleti Károly Faculty of Economics at Óbuda University, which concluded on April 22, 2026. The questionnaire was completed by 46 students. In addition to using simple statistical methods, the analysis sought to identify relationships between variables, including the calculation of correlations.

3 Results

About half of the respondents were men and the other half were women. The average age of the respondents was 21.5 years. The average level of trust in people was 5.18, which is slightly above average. If the respondent knows the other person personally, the level of trust rises to 7.6. In terms of educational background, 71% do not have a degree, meaning they are enrolled in an undergraduate program, while the rest are pursuing a master's degree. The group consists mostly of international students.

Gender
46 válasz

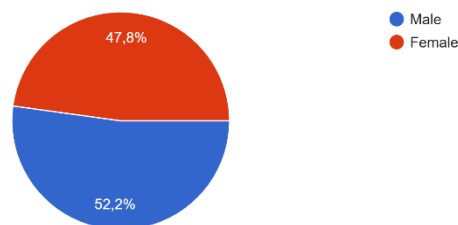


Figure 1
Gender distribution

Students trust the university the most, although it is unclear whether respondents were concerned that the survey was not anonymous, and thus how honest they were. The level of trust in institutions is low. Students trust the media the least, and overall, trust in institutions is below average—very low.

	Survey of Óbuda University	Results in 2013	Dif
Parliament	2,78	2,21	0,57
Police	3,01	2,63	0,38
Civil service	2,94	2,18	0,76
The courts	3,10	2,65	0,45
Political parties	2,07	1,9	0,17
The armed forces	2,84	2,6	0,24
The civil service	2,81	2,19	0,62
The media	1,91		
The banks	2,61	2,04	0,57
Major companies	2,74		
University	3,60	3,2	0,40

Table 1:
Levels of Trust in 2026 and 2013. Source: own survey and Fábri (2018) [14]

When it came to the questions regarding levels of trust in various actors, a very mixed picture emerged.

The government spends too much on higher education.	2,25
College/ University students protest and argue too much; they should be studying instead.	2,34
You can't get into college, university if you come from a family with limited financial means.	2,45
Only people with a degree should be allowed to hold leadership positions.	2,59
Young people should learn a trade/profession rather than try to go to college/university.	2,61
College/ University graduates are more valuable members of society than those with lower levels of education.	2,77
Anyone who earned a degree with state funding should be required to work in Hungary for at least as long as the duration of their university studies after graduation.	2,80
It is easier to find a job today with a degree than without one.	3,05
First, the economy must improve; then we can spend more on higher education.	3,05
The unemployment rate is particularly high among graduates.	3,09
There are too many college/university graduates because many people do not want to do manual labor.	3,14
Graduates look down on those with lower levels of education.	3,16
A college/university graduate should earn significantly more than someone with a lower level of education.	3,25
There should be more college graduates, because they are the ones who will drive the country forward.	3,48
Today, many graduates are doing jobs that don't even require a degree.	3,59
Higher education improves Hungary's reputation around the world.	3,64
The economy will improve if more is spent on higher education first	3,66
A degree often doesn't reflect real knowledge. Many people just get a piece of paper in higher education.	3,66

Table 2
Level of Trust in 2026. Source: own survey

Students are less confident about the future, but they agreed that the government should focus more on training, as investing in education will have long-term positive effects on the economy as well.

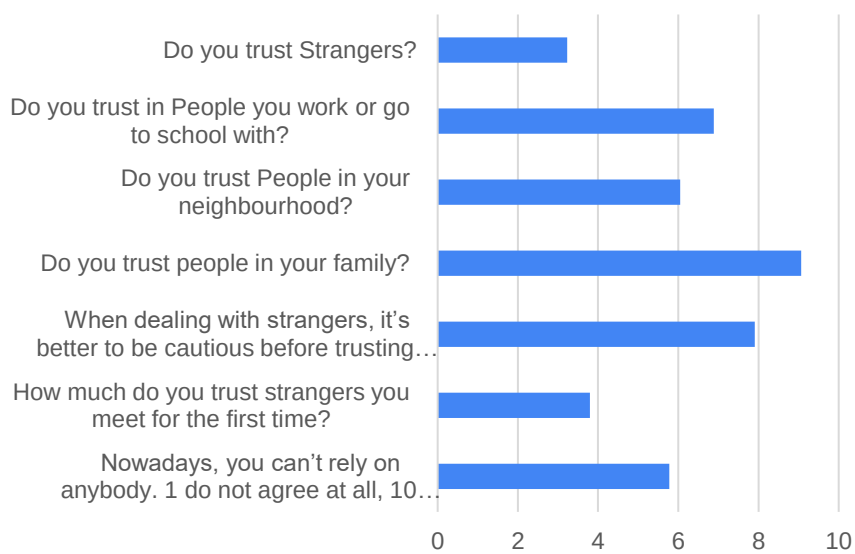


Figure 2
Trust issues

The second figure shows that the closer the familiarity, the higher the level of trust.

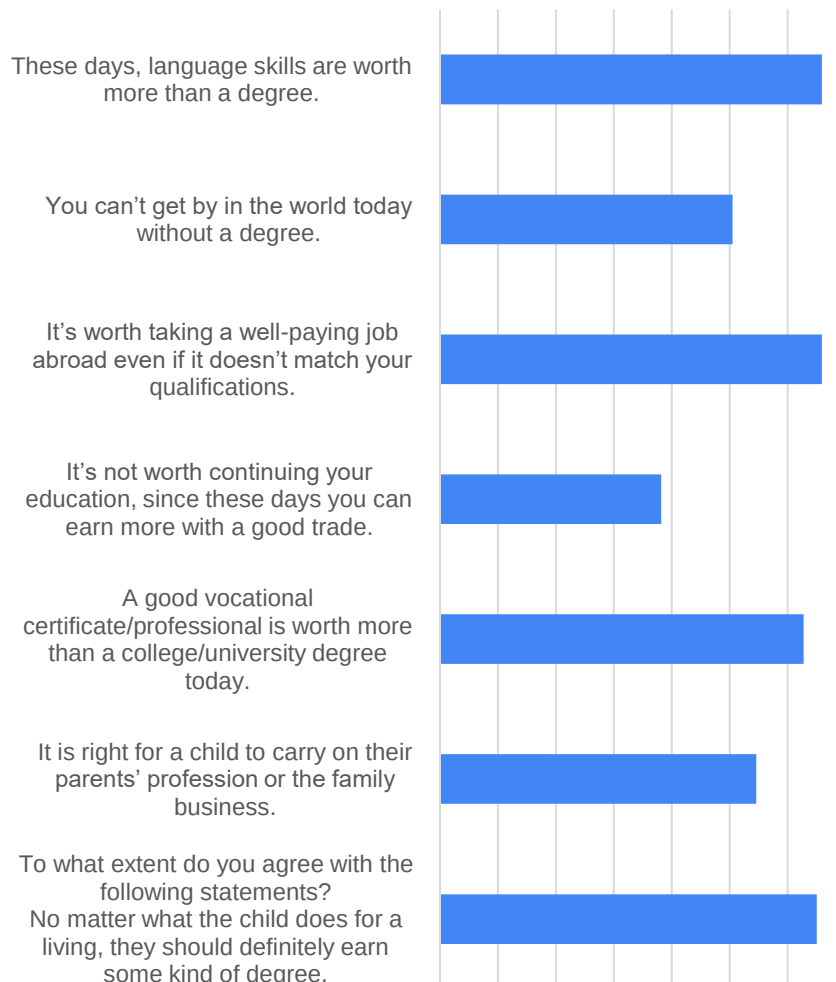


Figure 3
Trust issues II

It can be said that confidence in the degree remains very high among students. Although a similar survey conducted in 2013 yielded slightly lower confidence scores, this may be because that survey surveyed Hungarian students, whereas this survey primarily surveyed international students. The baseline level of trust, which may influence other factors, is likely the level of trust in people. When compared via correlation with other trust levels, it did not yield any results, as it is practically impossible to demonstrate a correlation between the two. Thus, it showed no connection with either institutional or general levels of trust in people.

Conclusions

The following findings stand out from the survey.

- Trust has improved compared to the previous survey
- This is partly because the previous survey was typically Hungarian, whereas this one was international.
- People trust family members more than strangers
- There is no universal truth when it comes to higher education. In some cases it is valuable; in others, it is not.
- There is no correlation between trust in institution and trust in people general

According to this definition, if students and teachers participate in joint programs that are meaningful to both of them, trust between them can be built and strengthened [4]. Such joint activities include joint classes and off-campus programs, which strengthen the teacher-student relationship and the students' level of trust. It is recommended that instructors organize and participate in such programs and show interest in their students, which also strengthens student trust. According to Kumar (1996), a key advocate of the trust-based principle, trust is interpreted as reliability. Teachers and the university, insofar as they demonstrate reliability, also strengthen student trust. This includes maintaining high standards in the classroom, providing assistance, and keeping the promises they make [5]. When an individual perceives low risk, they are willing to approach the other party with trust [7]. This is how predictability is demonstrated to students—that is, by establishing a set of expectations that is clearly communicated and published in advance, as well as by setting expectations that students believe they can meet. Very often, an individual trusts another person if the latter fulfills their obligations [8].

So these steps are certainly important for building student trust. Students' trust in their peers is closely linked to the extent to which they identify with their school. In other words, it is necessary to define common goals that students believe in and are willing to follow [13].

Acknowledgement

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