

An alternative to positive discrimination?

The first five years of the Gyula Illyés Programme¹

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ABSTRACT: In the autumn of 2021, Corvinus University of Budapest launched the Gyula Illyés Programme to support young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This study analyses the programme's outcomes in the light of the experiences of the lecturers leading the programme, members of student organisations, and the young participants – and, not least, the work of Gyula Illyés. The ten-month programme develops not only professional skills but also personal skills. The approach of the Gyula Illyés Programme differs from established affirmative action models in two respects: (1) firstly, it imparts the skills necessary for success and only subsequently assists with university admissions, and (2) the Programme takes into account the disadvantaged situation itself rather than the participants' background. The Programme's experiences may prove useful for Hungarian higher education in promoting the institutional integration of equal opportunities.

KEYWORDS: positive discrimination, equal opportunities, higher education, disadvantage, catching up

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*“And how many Adys, how many Bartóks, how many Attila Józsefs
are lost among the children of families moving in from the plains,
because they never even get as far as holding a pencil in their hands.”*
(Gyula Illyés, *The People of the Puszta*)

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- 1 The half-yearly background discussions on the development of the Programme, and the comments made during these by Ágota Dobos, Krisztina Megyeri, Ibolya Nagy, members of the Studium Generale student organisation and participants in the Gyula Illyés Programme, were of great assistance in the preparation of this study. Any errors that may remain are the responsibility of the authors.
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A brief overview of the Gyula Illyés Programme

Launched in the autumn of 2021, the Gyula Illyés Programme – a talent development initiative run by Corvinus University of Budapest – is now in its fifth year. The Programme helps young people in need to gain access to university education and to identify their career goals in higher education through a ten-month, personalised training programme. The programme builds technical skills (*hard skills*), whilst providing intensive preparation in English and mathematics. In addition, through the smooth integration into university life, it also develops personal skills (*soft skills*) such as problem-solving and self-reflection. Alongside individual mentoring, participants study alongside international students in a global environment, deepening their knowledge. Programme participants are supported by volunteers and students from Corvinus University of Budapest, including members of the Studium Generale student organisation. This study summarises the history of the Gyula Illyés Programme, its connection to Illyés's body of work and its achievements, thereby shedding light on an equal opportunities programme that may point the way forward as an alternative to widespread models of positive discrimination.⁴

Corvinus University of Budapest established the Programme's guiding principles, structure and funding framework in the autumn and winter of 2021. It first advertised the Programme in the spring of 2022, and the first intake of students took place in the summer of 2022. The first cohort began their studies in the ten-month programme in the autumn of 2022. Since then, the university has advertised the Programme every year, and it has been launched every year. Applications and admissions for the summer of 2026 are currently underway at the time of writing.

To be eligible to apply for the Programme, applicants must come from a disadvantaged background, meaning that neither of their parents nor their foster parents holds a university degree. In addition, applicants must be Hungarian citizens, aged 26 or under, hold a school-leaving certificate, and have a command of English equivalent to B1 level (which, in the case of the school-leaving certificate, means at least an 'average' grade).

The Programme provides comprehensive support to successful applicants. It offers an intensive preparatory course running for 10 months over one academic year, comprising 30 hours per week, during which Programme participants study English and mathematics alongside international students. During the course, the university provides a monthly net scholarship of 150,000 forints, free accommodation in halls of residence, one hot meal a day, a laptop, and a mobile phone and internet subscription. In addition, the Programme covers the cost of one

4 A brief description of the programme, primarily from the perspective of prospective students, can also be found on the website of Corvinus University of Budapest: <https://www.uni-corvinus.hu/fooldal/hello-corvinus/felkeszito-kurzusok/corvinus-illyes-gyula-program/>

return journey home per month, the cost of re-sitting the school-leaving examination, mentoring and a Budapest travel pass. The costs of the Programme are covered by Corvinus University of Budapest. Successful graduates of the Programme also receive an extra 100 points if they apply for admission to Corvinus.

The development of professional skills is centred around the English language programme and mathematics tuition. The structure of the English language programme follows the traditional university course model, and is therefore organised around a timetable and examinations. The courses cover a wide range of topics, including grammar, reading comprehension and academic English. During the second semester, English language teaching is expanded to include language modules more closely linked to university studies, such as English for mathematics, business or the social sciences. In the university's English language programme, to which the Illyés Gyula Programme is linked, international students form 3–4 fee-paying groups, with a maximum of 15–20 students per group. Participants in the Illyés Gyula Programme study in the same groups as the international students, and when the groups are formed, participants are distributed evenly amongst them, thereby facilitating their integration.

Another key element in the development of vocational skills is maths tuition. This also takes place in groups, supplemented by individual consultations. The number of students taking part in maths tuition varies from year to year, typically ranging from 1 to 4. Maths tuition usually begins with several students in September; however, by February, the number of students receiving maths tuition typically decreases as it becomes clearer exactly what kind of training each student requires.

The Programme aims to develop personal skills through personalised mentoring and integration into university programmes.

The Programme deliberately starts with a small intake: the maximum number of participants has been set at ten. The actual number of participants in the Programme has remained lower than this every year (it admitted 8, 3, 4 and 8 participants in each year, respectively). The most significant bottleneck in terms of the Programme's intake is the number of applicants. Despite every effort, it has not been possible to reach enough disadvantaged applicants who would benefit most from the Programme – consequently, the Programme has not reached the maximum enrolment limit of ten students.^{5 6}

The university community is involved in the implementation of the Programme at several levels. Each year, around 15 English language tutors take

5 The University promotes the programme on its own website, through foundations working in the field of equal opportunities, and in sponsored articles. For example, the University is advertising the summer 2026 intake in several places: <https://telex.hu/tamogatott-tartalom/2026/07/29/igy-potolhato-amikor-nem-tehetsegbol-hanem-lehetosegbol-van-hiany-corvinus> In addition, members of the university community, including both lecturers and students, are promoting the programme on their own social media channels.

6 This also demonstrates that the programme is not driven by short-term, quantifiable targets (such as the number of admissions), but rather pursues more complex objectives.

part in the English language training, supplemented by 6–8 teachers from the Studium Generale (SG), who teach and mentor Programme participants in mathematics and history.⁷ In addition, on an ad hoc basis, 4–8 students, communication and administrative assistants, as well as 5–6 individual teachers and tutors (some on a voluntary basis, others on a paid basis) also contribute to the Programme's success. The intensity of the university assistants' work varies considerably; some devote as little as one hour to the Programme, whilst others remain actively involved for up to one and a half years, depending on their individual schedules and availability.⁸

This article draws on regular discussions, held twice a year, with young people participating in the programme, lecturers at Corvinus University and members of the Studium Generale student organisation supporting the programme, as well as on a formal qualitative questionnaire survey conducted in May 2026 (a detailed summary of which is appended to this article).

The context of talent development initiatives in Hungarian higher education

The Gyula Illyés Programme occupies a unique position within the landscape of talent development initiatives in Hungarian higher education. Focusing on opportunities for disadvantaged students, the transition from secondary education to higher education and the successful attainment of the school-leaving certificate () are supported by several talent development programmes within the Hungarian system. Examples include the Arany János Programme, the Útravaló Scholarship Programme and other initiatives, most of which are organised by foundations.

Corvinus University offers the Studium Generale school-leaving exam preparation programme, which, with the help of volunteer university students, pro-

7 The Studium Generale (SG) student organisation has been operating since 1970, providing free tuition in mathematics, history and economics to pupils in Years 11 and 12. The organisation's teachers are selected from among students at Corvinus University of Budapest, who work for the organisation on a voluntary basis, without financial remuneration, providing high-quality education to secondary school pupils. <https://www.studiumgenerale.hu/kuldetesunk-es-tevekenysegeink/>

8 The programme was launched in its institutionalised form by Előd Takáts, the University's rector, and has been fully supported by the University's management ever since. Krisztina Megyeri, a lecturer at the University, has played a leading role in the development, academic supervision and mentoring of participants from the very beginning – and she also taught mathematics. Ágota Dobos, as head of the University's language centre, oversaw the delivery of English language teaching and the Programme's integration with international students. Éva Bodnár shaped the Programme's educational psychology framework and also took part in career guidance mentoring. Ibolya Nagy supported the participants' integration and their settling in Budapest and at the University, in addition to the Programme's administrative organisation. Mária Illyés, as the heir to the Gyula Illyés name licence, authorised the use of the name.

vides a one-year, free course in mathematics, history and economics. In the SG programme, approximately 140–150 volunteer university students teach 800–1,000 school-leavers. However, this programme is less accessible to those who face not only academic challenges but also a wide range of difficulties and systemic problems. Other hindering factors arising alongside the challenges of the university entrance exams – such as modest financial circumstances, an unstable family background or a different social environment – can make it impossible to successfully complete even the most effective university entrance preparation programme (Márton 2026).

Several forms of support are available to students who have already been admitted to the university. One group of these primarily provides social and financial support (such as scholarships or halls of residence accommodation), whilst others, such as certain mentoring programmes and specialist colleges, focus on students' professional development and career goals, community life and mental wellbeing. However, these are only accessible once the applicant has already been admitted to the higher education institution in question. A further difficulty for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is that these programmes often select their members on the basis of academic performance or community involvement – thus, paradoxically, they require precisely those skills that most need to be developed.

The Illyés Gyula Programme fills a gap in this range of what might be considered traditional opportunities, as it addresses precisely the gap that lies between completing secondary school, passing the school-leaving examination with varying degrees of success, and gaining entry to the desired university. Following a failed university entrance exam, a young person from a disadvantaged background can easily find themselves in a vacuum until the next opportunity to apply or retake the school-leaving exam. In this limbo, over the course of this year, a disadvantaged young person may take a different path, lose their motivation to continue their education, or, in the absence of family support, be unable to prepare adequately for the next entrance examination. A similar situation may arise if the student is accepted on their first attempt onto a different course that is of less interest to them; they may thus remain in a compromising situation rather than making efforts in the following years to obtain the qualification they truly desire (Proity 2025).

Differences between the Programme and common affirmative action models, and other distinctive features

The Illyés Gyula Programme differs from common affirmative action models in two fundamental respects. One of the most significant differences is that the Illyés Gyula Programme places the emphasis on the period *preceding* university selection, particularly on the development of young people's professional and personal skills. With this approach, participants in the Programme are given the

opportunity to integrate effectively into their chosen university communities and to thrive there, thanks to their enhanced skills.

At the same time, a common criticism of widespread positive discrimination models is that participants' skill gaps continue to place them at a disadvantage. According to the mechanism described by Sanders (2005) and Sanders and Taylor (2012), assistance provided exclusively during the admissions process can backfire: although disadvantaged students do gain entry to a university setting, they will not succeed there, as their academic and personal skills—having arrived in the new environment unprepared—lag behind those of the average student. This sets off a negative spiral: during their studies, they are unable to bridge the existing skills gap, as teaching is based on the skills of average students and sets the pace of progress accordingly. With each passing day, the gap for disadvantaged students widens; they perform worse in assessments and may even drop out – if not from university altogether, then at least from degree programmes with higher technical requirements. Thus, the currently widespread models of positive discrimination may even exacerbate their disadvantage. The Gyula Illyés Programme eliminates this potential problem, as the development of professional and personal skills precedes university admission.

The second difference from the widespread positive discrimination models lies in the fact that the Gyula Illyés Programme assesses disadvantage in its own right and does not use origin or ethnic background as a clear indicator of disadvantage. For example, a significant proportion of disadvantaged young Hungarians are of Roma origin, but not all young people of Roma origin are disadvantaged – and many young people who are not of Roma origin are also disadvantaged. Thus, the Gyula Illyés Programme does not target Roma young people exclusively; it is explicitly open to all disadvantaged young people – although a significant proportion of the Programme's participants are of Roma origin. The Programme thus offers opportunities exclusively on the basis of actual need to disadvantaged young people from various backgrounds – such as war refugees, orphans, etc. – whom existing models of positive discrimination based on origin would be unable to assist. This eliminates the injustice that arises in connection with other positive discrimination models, whereby, in certain cases, a young person of 'suitable' background but from a middle-class family might receive the support – thereby depriving a genuinely disadvantaged young person of the opportunity to excel. This value choice has been one of the cornerstones of the Programme's design from the outset: it has, in part, limited the Programme's scale, as it requires the degree of disadvantage to be assessed for every potential participant.

Five further key elements of the Gyula Illyés Programme are also essential to understanding it. The first is integration. The Gyula Illyés Programme builds on existing university structures and communities, using them as a sort of supporting framework, and integrates the Programme and its participants into these structures and communities. Participants are not separated from university students, nor are they forced into integration too quickly: they become involved in university communities step by step, as the development of their

skills allows. Although participants in the Programme are not formally university students, the organisers take great care to ensure that they find a community that suits them. For example, international students – who are themselves often uncertain during their initial integration into life in Hungary and Budapest – have proved to be much more open to welcoming participants in the Illyés Gyula Programme than students from Budapest's elite secondary schools, who already possess local knowledge and a strong network of local contacts. This difference is particularly pronounced in the first part of the Programme, whilst the participants' skills are still developing.

The second key element is clear and unambiguous communication with participants. The Programme clearly communicates both its benefits and its expectations. Participants receive clear feedback on their performance and results – and also on any areas where they need to improve. If performance is inadequate, they are given a deadline to improve and, of course, professional and personal support. The Programme also makes it clear that if performance does not improve to the expected extent, the opportunity to participate in the Programme will cease – all of this is done to protect the other participants and the Programme's resources.

The third aspect is the gradual development of decision-making skills. At the outset, the Programme retains responsibility for many decisions, but as participants' skills gradually improve, it delegates these decisions back to them. An example: participants receive certain benefits, such as lunch, in kind – to ensure that, given the cost of living in Budapest, disadvantaged young people do not suffer from malnutrition. Such top-down decisions are far more necessary at the start of the Programme than at the end. Somewhat paradoxically, participants also report that, overall, this gradual approach has significantly improved their personal decision-making skills during the Programme. According to the feedback, participants feel that, during the Programme, they are able to make independent decisions on the issue most important to them – their career choice – in line with their own values and personality.

The fourth factor is the small size of the group. The Programme was deliberately launched with a small number of participants. This small scale enables 1) intensive support for participants, 2) flexible adaptation of the Programme without compromising participants' opportunities, and 3) the flexible, voluntary involvement of members of the Corvinus University of Budapest community – including staff and students – in the Programme, without overburdening the community. The university and the Programme were also subject to public political pressure from a Member of Parliament to expand the Programme. However, this pressure was successfully managed through professional dialogue, and the Member of Parliament who had voiced the criticism was also convinced by the Programme's well-considered approach, including with regard to participant numbers.

The fifth factor is flexibility: adapting the Programme in line with experience. Although the organisers endeavoured to take a wide range of experiences

into account when designing the Programme, and held consultations with both the organisers and participants of previous equal opportunities initiatives, there was complete agreement that the Programme must be adapted flexibly in line with experience or changes in legislation. One example: during the planning of the Programme, the main objective was to prepare students for university entrance examinations. The aim was to provide an opportunity for university study to students whose disadvantaged circumstances would otherwise prevent them from doing so. However, changes in legislation and the liberalisation of university admissions have rendered this objective obsolete, as virtually everyone can now gain entry to some form of higher education institution. Consequently, the Programme has set itself the goal of developing the appropriate skills and helping participants find the university that is most beneficial to them. This does not necessarily mean the most prestigious university, but rather the community where the students' abilities can develop to their fullest potential in the future.

Gyula Illyés, the programme's namesake

"How many have made it out into the fresh, free air, into the world of free thought, to bring news of the lives of those left behind? Perhaps none. Just as the farmhand's words falter in the presence of the landowner and he merely waves his arm—if he waves it at all—so too can the different social strata only communicate something intelligibly to one another through stammering and various gestures of the shoulders and fists. It was extremely rare for anyone from the plains to rise to higher intellectual circles; he took nothing of the spirit of the plains with him. Nor could he have done so. Just as raw animal hide does not transform into fine satin through repeated soaking, tanning, kneading and scraping, so too does the boy from the plains, who by some marvellous chance gains entry to secondary school and becomes a member of visible society. What percentage of Hungarian university students are drawn from the millions of servants and tenant farmers? It is difficult to express even in tenths of a per cent."

(Illyés 1945: 286)

In its approach, the Programme follows the intentions of its namesake and the values he established: Gyula Illyés, born in Tolna County in 1902, rose above the fate that had been predestined for him as a member of a social class that had endured hardship. The launch of the Programme was inspired by Gyula Illyés's life story, his novel **The People of the Puszta** (**Illyés 1936**),⁹ and other self-reflective works of prose, which bring to life his own youth, the mile-

9 The relevance of **The People of the Puszta** is evident in today's popular culture, for example at public readings: <https://telex.hu/karakter/konyvespolc/2026/02/02/telex-olvasoklub-illyes-gyula-pusztak-nepe-nyary-krisztian>

stones and turning points of his life.¹⁰ Illyés was convinced that helping those living in difficult financial and social circumstances – or, to use a modern term, those facing multiple disadvantages – was a worthwhile endeavour for society as a whole. Beyond the moral arguments, there lies economic and cultural potential in helping them catch up.¹¹ After the Second World War, opportunities arose to support the education of talented young people living in extreme poverty; part of this was the system of ‘people’s boarding schools’ between 1946 and 1948.¹²

But how can a history stretching back more than a century and nearly a century’s worth of experience serve as a guide for a young person starting out on their career in the twenty-first century?

Our article demonstrates that Illyés’s life journey and social engagement can serve as a point of reference for young people starting out from a disadvantaged background who, with the help of education and through their own efforts, have managed to rise above it. To the authors’ surprise, several challenges persist in almost unchanged form. One such example is the difficulty talented young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face in integrating into the social groups traditionally present in elite institutions.

There is a marked difference in approach between this study and traditional literary historiography. Literary historical scholarship has traditionally attached less importance to exploring the motivations underlying personality development, identity formation and decision-making, and analyses Illyés’s life either as a linear sequence of biographical facts or as the experiential material underpinning his body of work (*N Horváth 2021*). From the perspective of our study, however, it is precisely the responses to circumstances and opportunities that arose throughout his life, the conscious shaping of his destiny, and the resulting formation of his identity that are of the greatest significance (*Gara 1965*).

Reflecting on the Programme’s namesake, we shall discuss the Programme’s main elements in relation to the three milestones in the life of the young Gyula Illyés, as also addressed in his self-reflective prose: (1) breaking away from

10 One idea from **The People of the Puszta** resonated in several places when the Programme was launched. At the school in the Puszta, whilst Gyula Illyés was learning about Hungarians and Hungarian history, he failed to recognise for a very long time that he himself was Hungarian – such was the stark contrast between the outcomes depicted in the stories in the books and the reality of life in the Puszta that he himself experienced. Both Előd Takáts (when the Programme was launched at university level) and Mária Illyés (when the Programme was presented) independently cited this story, and the related link between disadvantage and social cohesion, as a source of inspiration.

11 Together with his wife, the special needs teacher Flóra Kozmutza, he spent several years (1938–42) conducting research amongst the underprivileged children of Doboz in Békés County to determine the extent to which financial circumstances influence children’s intellectual development. Traces of this research can also be found in his self-reflective prose work **Soul and Bread** (Illyés 1939).

12 However, the education policy of the time deemed this unnecessary and abolished it (*Domokos 2006*).

his former community, (2) finding his own path, and finally (3) consciously embracing his roots.

First milestone: the breakaway

Breakaway is a key element in Gyula Illyés's first novel, **The People of the Plains**. In this book, intended as a sociographic work (1936), Illyés chronicled the lives of an entire social stratum – the millions of impoverished rural servants – whose existence was often invisible to other members of society. At the same time, and in a way that is even more relevant to the present study, he recounted the experiences of his own former, child self until, through great struggle, he left life on the Puszta behind him.

The separation from home and one's former community is also one of the defining elements of the Gyula Illyés Programme. Under the Programme, participants are provided with accommodation in Corvinus University of Budapest's city-centre hall of residence, which not only resolves the practical problems of finding accommodation in Budapest – particularly for students from the countryside, who make up the overwhelming majority of the Programme – but also facilitates the formation of new communities. Accommodation in the halls of residence offers an alternative to the difficult and costly process of finding a flat to rent, which in many cases would be impossible for disadvantaged young people, who often live without family support. Furthermore, shared accommodation gives participants the opportunity to live alongside international students, with whom they can form new friendships through shared activities – such as cooking or running errands. In this way, students not only become part of a new community but also enter a completely new cultural and social world, which enriches their personal and professional development.

However, this separation is difficult. It is hard to leave one's homeland, one's way of life, one's values, one's daily routines and the people one knows well. In fact, Gyula Illyés did not take this first step of his own accord: his grandmother, who was committed to ensuring her grandchildren received an education, practically forced him to stand out when she enrolled him in the market-town school from the plains. In this new environment, the young Illyés had to strengthen not only his academic knowledge but also his personal skills. Here he was put to the test in adaptability, communication, the ability to develop, and other skills. This did not come without its difficulties, as the young Illyés stood out completely from the crowd at the market-town school in its urban, increasingly bourgeois environment.

'At first I suffered in the market town, I suffered terribly, as if a layer of skin were being flayed from me every day,' he writes in the final chapter of his novel (Illyés 1936: 294) about this forced process of transformation.¹³

At this stage, the writer had only to a small extent shaped his own destiny. He was aware that he had to study hard, but the drive to do so did not yet stem from within him. His progress was decisively influenced by the supportive yet demanding expectations of his family.

At first, Illyés felt a strong emotional attachment to his original environment and had not yet developed the sense of identity that would allow him to exist authentically alongside both his past and his new future.

During the planning of the Gyula Illyés Programme, particular attention was paid to managing the separation from home: alongside harnessing the positive aspects and inspiration of the new environment, the aim was to support young people in coping with the negative aspects. When designing the Programme, the organisers also drew on the experiences of other similar initiatives. They held numerous discussions and listened actively to the experiences and insights of young people involved in successful talent development schemes. This led to the realisation that it was important to support young people newly enrolled in the Programme in their day-to-day decisions and, where necessary, to take the burden of these decisions off their shoulders. For example, disadvantaged young people from rural areas often did not dare to buy lunch in Budapest, as they considered Budapest prices to be too high – which, however, clearly had a negative impact on their long-term performance. The solution to this problem was to provide lunch in kind, thereby reducing the mental burden on the young people.

Much like Gyula Illyés's experiences at school in a market town, integration at university is no simple matter. This is, in part, a paradox: former pupils of the capital's elite grammar schools are, in theory, advocates of equal opportunities, both on the basis of their professed values and their self-image. However, day-to-day integration does not operate on the basis of professed values and self-image, but rather on the basis of actual skills. What counts is reading ability, general knowledge, and familiarity with certain topics – resources that are simply not available to disadvantaged young people. A regional accent or choice of

13 He felt so out of place that when he was teased for his regional accent, he made a sudden decision and ran back to the plains that very same day. Of course, he was found a few days later and taken back to school, but even then he resisted: *'At the third or fourth station, without any prior plan, with my hair loose and wearing only a light coat, I got off the train and calmly made my way out of the station. My cousin caught up with me in front of the station's toilets, (...) the train was already whistling; he grabbed me by the collar and dragged me, running, onto the train that was already moving. I didn't resist. I went where they took me'* (Illyés 1945: 300). He himself sums up his attempt to escape as follows: *"The plains pulled me back once more. They pulled me back and let me go, but I do not know whether, through some secret thread, they did not bind me most tightly to themselves at that very moment."* (Illyés 1945: 296.)

words is not necessarily the subject of open ridicule, but it can lead to exclusion just the same. Background studies conducted prior to the launch of the Programme and in-depth discussions with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who have succeeded clearly highlighted these integration difficulties. These insights reinforced the Programme's main objective: that integration should be approached gradually, ideally after the necessary skills have been developed – because without the right skills, it may fail even with the best of intentions.

The Programme's tutors also provide personalised support to the young people, which helps to prevent and effectively manage problems. The frequency of meetings with mentees depends on the students' needs; some are met with fortnightly, whilst others are met several times a week. A psychologist is also available, but the young people rarely seek their help. Those who do need it usually receive psychological support with the help of charitable foundations.

Overall, according to the young people's questionnaire responses and personal feedback, the separation during the Programme proved to be less difficult than the organisers had originally anticipated, which largely reflects the effectiveness of the preventive and supportive measures. This conscious planning and sensitive response to participants' needs help to ensure that the Programme provides not only professional development but also positive personal experiences.

Second milestone: finding one's own path

The second milestone is the search for and discovery of one's own path and one's own voice. In Illyés's life, this came to fruition during the period following the end of the First World War and the ensuing turbulent times. The question during this era was no longer one of attachment to or separation from one's homeland, but rather the formation of one's own, independent identity.

Illyés did not merely decide on his political and social allegiances at this time, nor did he merely take an active part in illegal organising. By the end of **Beatrice's Pages** (Illyés 1979), his role as an intellectual—his desire to become a writer—is already taking shape, and in forging this identity, he no longer needs others to tell him what serves his interests. He has his own goals and visions for his life. He finds his own path.

Just as in the life of the young Illyés, the community plays a crucial role in the success of the Gyula Illyés Programme and its individual participants. The young people moving to the capital inevitably find their previous relationships loosening, whilst forming new ones alongside them. They no longer merely imagine, but actually experience, the university environment, which is also designed to lay the foundations for their future professional relationships and to impart the rules governing professional community life. Alongside all this, their outlook is characterised by a broadening of horizons and a signifi-

cant shift in perspective, which enables them to better assess their own position and development.

It is therefore important to determine whether participating students recognise and are able to consciously shape these relationships, whether they are receptive to the workings of communities, and whether these communities inspire their integration. In our survey, we devoted two questions (III.2, 3) to this aspect. Based on the participants' responses, inspiring new relationships play a prominent role throughout the Programme. Respondents primarily highlighted their personal mentors as inspiring figures; however, many also considered the support of other Programme participants, fellow students or hall of residence mates to be important.

In their own responses, participants highlighted their connections with students at Corvinus University of Budapest:

"The Corvinus students, some of whom I became friends with, inspired me with their knowledge and awareness. I was delighted to be surrounded by such people, from whom I gained even more motivation."

Some considered openness to new experiences, as a value learnt here, to be important:

"Be bold in reaching out to strangers, because even a stranger might say something that changes the course of your life, or offer you an opportunity or friendship that will last a lifetime."

For many, it was their fellow programme participants who formed the circle from whom they learnt and drew inspiration:

"It was through the students taking part in the Programme that I found my community, particularly amongst those living in halls of residence. I tried to offer help whenever anyone needed it. I received a great deal of encouragement and had many wonderful experiences from this community."

In the pursuit of independence and finding one's own path, the Gyula Illyés Programme adopts an approach that may seem paradoxical at first glance. The Programme, particularly at the outset, is top-down in nature – and this top-down skills development helps participants to achieve genuine and well-founded decision-making autonomy later on. During discussions, both students and their teachers frequently reflect on these goals. At the start of the Programme, these are not yet truly their own goals: the young people's minds are filled with half-baked stereotypes of success, often drawn from success stories seen in TV series, which the students attempt to imitate. By the end of the Programme, or a year or two later, however, we see much more mature ideas and ambitions. Participants reflect not only on external opportunities and expecta-

tions, but also on their own goals, strengths and interests. They recognise that they must follow their own path.

Third milestone: accepting one's roots

The third milestone is acceptance: the synthesis of the old home and new ambitions, when the search for one's own path no longer takes place by neglecting or in opposition to the old home, but by accepting it. In Gyula Illyés's life, this acceptance takes place in exile, in Paris.

Illyés left Hungary at the end of 1921 to escape arrest, which he faced due to his participation in illegal student movements. The novel **The Huns in Paris** (Illyés 1946) chronicles Illyés's years in Paris. He integrated into the community of Hungarian émigrés in Paris, who were mainly poor and lived from day-to-day labour, but over time he distanced himself from this community and learnt a trade. Earning his own living also gave him self-confidence. He forged lifelong relationships with members of the Parisian émigré community, with artists of his generation who would later become influential, and with members of the French intellectual and artistic circles. He acquired a wide-ranging knowledge of French culture, which he later put to good use as an editor, translator and creative writer. However, this was no longer the predetermined and systematised knowledge to be acquired at school, but rather a form of culture chosen according to his own values and instincts. After five years in Paris, Illyés returned to his homeland as a mature adult, with a solid foundation of knowledge and clear visions for his future, and within a few years he became known as a poet.

During this period, therefore, Illyés found himself confronted with a completely different world; one might feel that he had drifted light-years away from his homeland – yet he frequently evoked the world of home in his novels. Although he initially had no intention of returning to his homeland, he later realised that the role and mission he could wholeheartedly embrace were bound to his homeland. The distance reinforced his acceptance of his origins. In his later work, mediating between the various worlds in which he had – by then – made himself at home played a significant role; a sort of 'bridging role', as part of which he repeatedly sought opportunities to support disadvantaged young people.

This acceptance is, for the time being, less evident amongst participants in the Gyula Illyés Programme. One of the most important reasons for this is that the Programme has only been running for five years, and such self-reflection cannot yet be expected even from the earliest graduates – and this kind of acceptance would require more time. Ongoing follow-up will provide a clearer picture of how this acceptance develops – or indeed, of its absence. At the same time, there are signs that this acceptance is underway – alongside the participants' personal development. Thanks to the accepting, integrative ' ' attitude, young people have the opportunity to find the ways of experiencing these pro-

cesses that best align with their sense of self. In their personal conversations, participants described the Programme as a ‘safe place’ where past or present challenges, frustrations or even old grievances can all be discussed; where vulnerability is not judged; and where differing opinions and differing experiences arising from different backgrounds can be talked through. Several participants mentioned a desire to give something back to their home community in some form, perhaps through their personal career paths. But there is still plenty of time for that, as one participant wrote:

“I’ve realised that I don’t have to achieve everything at once, and certainly not at the age of 19. Now I have a calm and happy vision of the future ahead of me, rather than a bleak one...”

Personal skills and the role of the supportive community

Summarising the lessons from Illyés’s early life and milestones in relation to our topic, it is striking which skills and abilities are emphasised more in his progress: Illyés rarely writes about his academic results, his progress or his success at school. It is only occasionally suggested that he would have fared better had he excelled in a particular subject or skill. Nor does his high standard for himself manifest itself in measurable factual knowledge. Opportunities opened up for him primarily because he managed to grasp the workings of his era and the environment surrounding him; because he successfully integrated into a community, communicated effectively, boldly seized opportunities, and even managed to turn decisions born of necessity to his own advantage.

Through social mobility, Illyés passed through those phases that might be described as ‘classic’, which disadvantaged students wishing to pursue higher education still have to struggle through today (Komolafe–Dávid 2024). In the process of leaving his homeland, he faced the difficulties of integration – whilst, upon returning to his family, he had already become somewhat of a stranger. This dual identity may be the key to success for those changing their socio-cultural environment. Successful mentoring and supportive communities enable precisely the successful development of this dual identity.

In the Gyula Illyés Programme too – although social and financial support ensures the practical possibility of further education, and the lessons provided by the Programme bring students closer to successful admission – perhaps the greatest help in pursuing further education lies in the development of personal skills. Adapting to a new environment, learning new ways of functioning and embracing a new set of values are personal skills that also help to prevent the risk of dropping out later on (Lent et al, 1994). Research examining the likelihood of dropping out in higher education shows that ‘students who drop out typically have a disadvantaged social background coupled with a limited network of institutional contacts, so many of them are left to cope with their academic problems on their own,

whilst persistent students not only have a favourable background but their institutional integration also contributes to their success”; thus, “it is primarily weak institutional integration that reduces students’ persistence in higher education” (Kovács—Fényes—Pusztai 2023: 117). Similarly, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to possess the personal skills or even role models needed to navigate higher education – and mentoring helped in this regard too.

In addition to all this, the development of resilience may also deserve special attention (Kóródi—Szabó 2019). Resilience, a term borrowed from psychology and now used to describe a sociological phenomenon, refers to one of the key abilities of disadvantaged pupils: the ability to learn successfully despite hindering factors and to hold one’s own in the face of new challenges. Underlying this are sub-skills such as tolerance of failure, internal locus of control, and the adaptive seeking of help, as well as the ability to access external support, such as supportive relationships and the use of a supportive institutional environment. Several of the responses received in the questionnaire-based survey point to the development of this ability amongst the Programme’s participants. We can also see resilience at work, for example, in the context of the following response:

“I’ve developed most as a person during the Programme. I handle situations much more calmly, I don’t attach great importance to minor issues that can be resolved in a jiffy, I think my decisions through more carefully and I am more patient. I don’t beat myself up, and I no longer try to make excuses; I accept other people’s decisions and expect the same in return.”

The following response, which one participant phrased as a message to their ‘former self’, also reflects the development of resilience in the face of difficulties:

“Calm down, you have as much time as the sea, and no, you’re not too late – in fact, you never will be! It takes time to find what makes you happy. ... Don’t take seriously what others wouldn’t even notice. The bad news is that nobody cares what you’re doing; the good news is that nobody cares what you’re doing!”

According to Ceglédi (2018), a decisive factor in the successful participation of disadvantaged students in higher education is whether they manage to rebuild the cohesive, supportive relationships they experienced at secondary school and within their family environment once they enter higher education and find themselves in a new setting. All this confirms the role of personal skills development and individual mentoring in the Programme’s success. The importance of this sense of community cohesion is also clearly evident from the responses given in the questionnaire. The participants who provided the responses described their teachers personally, as well as their hall of residence mates and Corvinus students, as supportive figures:

“It’s incredible to see how much energy and time they devote to us in their spare time; it’s simply astonishing to me just how much they care about us.”

“Ms Megyeri inspired us with her teaching style; we could always count on her, (...) as well as on Ms Éva Bodnár, (...) The Corvinus students, with whom I also became friends, inspired me with their knowledge and awareness, and I was delighted to be surrounded by such people, from whom I gained even more motivation.”

“I learnt a great deal from my flatmates and the SG teachers, but most of all from Ms Krisztina Megyeri. Each of the students taking part in the Gyula Illyés Programme had a personal quality that I found exemplary and inspiring.”

“I found my community amongst the students taking part in the programme, particularly those living in halls of residence. I tried to offer help whenever anyone needed it. I received a great deal of encouragement and had many wonderful experiences from this community.”

The participants emphasised that they had acquired personal skills that would help them choose a career path and define their own goals more precisely.

“I’d taken steps to achieve my goals before, but here it really sank in what I’d need ... to realise my long-term plans – the things that would make this possible, which in turn require a stable job, for which a university degree and a certain level of knowledge are also necessary.”

“In terms of my personality, I’ve become more independent; I’ve managed my time between the Programme, my training sessions and my free time, striving to make the most of it, and I feel I’ve succeeded in doing so... I’ve become more confident and even more open-minded; here I’ve got a better sense of who I am, and I’ve become more aware of my previous goals, which I’m still working towards.”

Summary

This article presents the first five years of the Gyula Illyés Programme, which was launched in the autumn of 2021, partly in the context of Gyula Illyés’s life and his autobiographically inspired novels. The Programme helps young people in need to gain access to university education and to identify their career goals in higher education through a ten-month, personalised training programme. The Programme develops both professional skills (*hard skills*) and personal skills (*soft skills*).

The Gyula Illyés Programme differs from common *affirmative action* models in two fundamental ways. Firstly, the Gyula Illyés Programme focuses on building skills first and only assists with university selection once these skills have been developed. With this approach, participants in the Programme are given the opportunity to integrate effectively into their chosen university communities and to perform successfully there, thanks to their enhanced skills. On the other hand, the Illyés Gyula Programme focuses on need and disadvantage in their own right and does not use, for example, social background or ethnic origin on their own as indicators of disadvantage. In this way, the Programme ensures that disadvantaged young people from ‘inappropriate’ social backgrounds also have access to opportunities.

A detailed assessment of the Programme’s impact has not yet begun. This is partly due to the short time that has elapsed since its launch: the Programme was launched only five years ago, and participants are still undertaking the university courses they found through the Programme. Consequently, the full impact of the Programme on participants’ career paths is not yet apparent. At the same time, this seems to be an opportune moment to develop detailed assessments. On the one hand, the experiences of the past five years are available; on the other hand, the assessments now being launched will also build a longer-term database for evaluating the Programme. It would be worthwhile to involve researchers from Corvinus University of Budapest specialising in educational methodology and the economics of education in the planning of the survey. Last but not least, it would be worthwhile to make the survey results – in a suitably anonymised form – available to the research community so that the findings can be evaluated by the academic community and for research purposes.

Although this does not constitute detailed follow-up, based on participants’ accounts and the half-yearly meetings, the Programme appears to have been successful over the past five years, according to the participants’ assessments. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have found their place; not only within their university community but also beyond it, they have acquired problem-solving skills, become more resilient and identified the values that matter to them – all without the undoubtedly high performance expectations causing them any harm. As one participant wrote:

“For me, this Programme was one of the most wonderful periods of my life; it helped me grow as a person, and I was sorry to see it come to an end.”

At the same time, the Programme helped to build the community at Corvinus University of Budapest. Thanks to the Programme’s flexible structure, lecturers and students were able to carry out voluntary support work alongside their work and studies without having to make any compromises. Working with disadvantaged young people (through teaching and mentoring) and the time spent together appear to have broadened the horizons of the university lecturers and students. All of this will hopefully help the university stu-

dents to become responsible citizens and responsible leaders in their future careers.

Last but not least, the lessons learnt from the Gyula Illyés Programme will hopefully assist in the design and development of broader university higher education and talent development programmes. This is particularly urgently needed in Hungary, as, by international standards, a student's social background still has a strikingly large influence on their prospects for academic advancement – and as a result, a great many talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds are lost to the system.

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Appendix – Questionnaire analysis

I.1. How many hours did you spend studying maths each week (as part of the relevant section of the Programme)?

The amount of time spent studying maths each week was generally significant, but varied among individual participants. Some did not take part in the maths section of the Programme at all, so they did not spend any time on it. Others devoted a minimal amount of time, for example 2–8 hours a week, to studying, which took the form of either teacher-led sessions or independent practice. At the same time, there were also respondents who prepared very intensively, devoting as many as 15–16 hours a week to mathematics. This included lessons with teachers, the Saturday Studium Generale sessions, individual practice, and working through mock A-level exam papers.

I.2. How much do you feel you have learnt/improved? More or less than during a year at secondary school?

The majority of participants feel that they have made significant progress during the Programme, far more than they did in a single year at secondary school. Several highlighted that they had made progress not only in their studies but also in their independence compared to their secondary school years. One respondent described in detail how they had made huge progress in mathematics, thanks to the personalised support from the teachers, particularly the help provided by Ms Krisztina Megyeri, as a result of

which their A-level result improved from 32 per cent to 80 per cent. In addition, they managed to significantly improve their English language skills, as demonstrated by a grade 4 in the intermediate-level school-leaving examination. The participants also emphasised that the Programme helped them to better understand and make connections between different topics, such as functions and equations, which represented a major step forward compared to their secondary school studies.

I.3. Did the programme succeed in improving mathematics A-level results? By how much?

The majority of participants successfully improved their maths A-level results. Some made significant progress, for example, improving from 32 per cent to 80 per cent, which equates to a grade improvement from a '2' to a '5'. Others also mentioned that they had achieved an improvement of around 20 per cent, which corresponds to a one-grade improvement. Some did not yet know their exact result, but estimated that they had managed to improve their result by around 10 per cent.

I.4. How useful do you feel the time and energy invested in studying maths was (in hindsight)?

The majority of participants considered the time and energy invested in studying maths to be very worthwhile. Even those who did not take part directly in the Programme experienced positive effects through others, for example by seeing the progress made by their flatmates. Those who took an active part emphasised that the extensive practice, completing the school-leaving exams and the support they received helped them to develop a routine and gain practice, which laid the foundations for their successful performance in the school-leaving exams.

II.1. How many hours did you spend studying English each week (in the relevant part of the Programme)?

The students devoted a significant amount of time to learning English. Some spent 8–12 hours a week studying English, whilst others, including university lectures, mentioned 14–18 hours a week. Several highlighted that the intensity of their studies increased as the school-leaving exams approached, particularly through practising exam papers. Some respondents felt that they had made more progress through independent study than in class. Overall, weekly study time ranged from 8 to as many as 18 hours, depending on individual approach and study methods.

II.2. How much do you feel you have learnt/improved? More or less than in one year of secondary school? In two years?

The majority of participants feel that they have learnt and progressed more in English than they did during one or even two years at secondary school. Many emphasised that the experiences gained during the

Programme not only improved their language skills but also had a positive influence on their outlook on life. Compared to secondary school studies, they considered the progress to be more practical and intensive, in contrast to the lexical approach taken in grammar school. Some are particularly proud that they can already actively apply the grammatical elements they have learnt, such as verb tenses, for example in conversations with their friends abroad. Although some felt that they had not yet made sufficient progress, the general experience was that the Programme had brought about significant improvement. One respondent noted that they had made less progress in the second term because they had been placed in an unsuitable group, but overall, progress was still evident.

II.3. Was there an improvement in the English A-level results? By how much?

With regard to the English A-level, participants generally perceived positive progress. Some had not previously held an English A-level and now achieved very good results. Others felt they had improved a great deal, though not necessarily as much as they had expected of themselves. One respondent originally took their school-leaving exam in German, but after the Programme they also successfully passed the intermediate-level English exam, achieving a grade 4, which exceeded their level in German. Several mentioned that they had taken the intermediate-level exam last year and had attempted the advanced-level exam this year, but the results are not yet fully available. One participant estimated an improvement of around 10 per cent based on the difference between the advanced and intermediate levels, but was unable to make an accurate comparison due to the lack of final results.

II.4. How useful do you feel the time and energy invested in learning English has been (in hindsight)?

The majority of participants considered the time and energy invested in learning English to be very worthwhile. Many emphasised that English, as a global language, is essential for communication and workplace requirements, so the skills and knowledge acquired during the Programme will prove valuable in the long term. At the same time, some noted that university lessons were not always effective or useful for them, particularly those focusing on textbook exercises. Instead, they found conversation-based lessons to be more productive. At the same time, some felt, looking back, that they had not prioritised learning English sufficiently, and regarded the time spent on more complex topics rather than the basics as a waste of time.

III.1. In what areas of non-academic knowledge do you feel you have developed during the Programme? What skills have you learnt? What personal quality have you discovered to be one of your strengths, and which will be of use to you in the future?

Participants developed in a number of non-academic areas during the

Programme and acquired valuable skills. Many highlighted that they had become more open-minded and that their communication and collaboration skills had improved, particularly through teamwork. Several feel that they have also grown as people: they handle situations more calmly, have become more patient, and think through their decisions more carefully. Time management and self-management have also taught them important lessons that they will be able to put to good use in the future.

Among their personal qualities, many highlighted their calm demeanour, their patience and the development of their self-awareness. Some reported that they had learnt to reduce their anxiety and stress, which proved particularly useful during the period leading up to their A-levels. They became more confident and relaxed, which helped them to define their goals more clearly and achieve them.

Learning from mistakes and resilience were also recurring themes. Participants feel that the experiences gained during the Programme helped them to get to know themselves better, push their boundaries, and face future challenges with greater preparedness.

III.2. Who did you learn from? Fellow participants, teachers, or SG students? Whose example, personality or life story was most inspiring to you amongst those you met here?

Based on the responses, participants drew inspiration and learnt from a wide variety of sources during the Programme. Several highlighted Ms Krisztina Megyeri, whose teaching methods, dedication and support were particularly inspiring to them. Many are grateful for the amount of energy and time the teachers invested in them, and for the fact that they could always count on them, whether for academic or personal matters.

Fellow programme participants and flatmates were also an important source of learning, as a single sentence, a personality trait or the example they set had a motivating effect. Some made a point of singling out the members of Corvinus University's student organisations, who inspired them with their awareness and knowledge. The SG (Studium Generale) lecturers and students also had a positive influence on some participants, who were delighted to be surrounded by such dedicated and motivated people.

At the same time, some noted that the attitude of the international students was less motivating, as they did not take their studies seriously. Nevertheless, most feel that the example and support of the people they met during the Programme – teachers, mentors, fellow participants and university students – had a significant impact on them and contributed to their development.

III.3. Who did you make friends with? What sort of community did you find within the Programme? How did you contribute to it, and what did you gain from the community?

For the participants, the Programme represented a diverse and supportive community where they formed friendships and forged valuable connections. Many highlighted that during the Programme they got to know people from a wide range of nationalities, which gave them the opportunity to experience cultural diversity and form new friendships. Several mentioned that they had formed close bonds with their international friends, taken part in joint activities, and had even been invited to visit each other's home countries.

Many of the participants found a sense of community amongst their fellow programme participants and their hall of residence flatmates. Mutual support, advice and encouragement played an important role in the relationships formed around shared goals and interests. Some specifically highlighted that they always tried to help when others needed it, and in return they received encouragement and enriching experiences from the community.

There were those who consciously sought out friendships that energised them, and so although they did not talk to everyone very much, this was not a problem but rather reflected a conscious approach to managing their relationships. Both the professional and community environments of the Programme were supportive and provided an opportunity for participants to work, learn and develop together.

III.4. To what extent have you become more goal-oriented with regard to your future? Has the way you envisage your future – and the role you see yourself playing in it – changed? In what ways? Please give a specific example!

The Programme had a significant positive impact on the participants' sense of purpose and the development of their vision for the future, although this manifested itself to varying degrees depending on the individual. Many highlighted that the Programme helped them to think more consciously about their goals and their future. Several participants realised their own strengths, such as their ability to collaborate, solve problems and organise, which in turn gave them a clearer idea of the direction in which they would like to continue their studies or pursue a career.

For some participants, the Programme offered a new perspective. For example, one person realised that they did not have to achieve everything at once, and a more balanced, happier vision of the future took shape in their mind. As a specific example, they mentioned envisaging themselves as a home decorator or interior designer, perhaps running their own business where they are their own boss. For others, the Programme reinforced their existing goals and helped them clarify the steps needed to achieve them, such as the importance of a university degree and a stable job.

Some discovered during the Programme which areas truly interested them, such as logistics and organisation in the business sector, whilst others arrived with specific ideas and found that the Programme served to

reinforce these. One respondent noted that although they themselves already had clear plans at the start of the Programme, the support and tools received during the Programme provide them with better opportunities to achieve their goals.

III.5. What advice would you give to your pre-course self?

The participants would give their pre-course selves a range of advice, focusing on the importance of self-confidence, openness, time management and making the most of opportunities. Several participants emphasised that they should have been bolder in taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the Programme and more open to meeting new people and having new experiences, as there is so much to learn and grow from these.

Many stressed that self-confidence and self-belief are key. They would advise their younger selves not to be afraid of making mistakes, to dare to ask questions, and not to take external expectations too seriously, because the most important thing is to pursue their own happiness and goals. Several people noted that growth takes time and that one shouldn't rush things, as everything in life happens in its own time.

Time management was also a recurring theme. Some would advise themselves to prioritise better, draw up a daily schedule, and not let others distract them from their goals. Some also noted that at the start of the Programme they had focused too much on performance, and this hadn't paid off; instead, they should have placed greater emphasis on community relationships.

Finally, many would encourage themselves to boldly take on new challenges, as these not only help them recognise their limits but also enable them to push beyond them. Self-awareness and personal development will help them in the long term to achieve their goals and lead a more balanced life.

IV.1. Is there anything else you'd like to share about the Programme or your personal development?

Participants look back on the Programme with satisfaction and gratitude. Many feel that the Programme was one of the finest periods of their lives, bringing them not only professional but also personal growth. Some emphasised that the experiences and lessons learnt have made them better people, and they regret that the Programme has come to an end.

Several participants emphasised that the Programme had contributed significantly to their personal development and that they had noticed positive changes in themselves. For example, they feel more balanced, cheerful and calm, a state of mind that developed during the intensive phase of the Programme. One participant particularly highlighted that the Programme had brought a sense of freedom into their life and had had a major impact on their self-awareness.