Statement by the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Ms. Farida Shaheed on her visit to Hungary, 10-21 March 2025

Budapest, 21 March 2025

It has been my honour as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education, to conduct an official visit to Hungary from 10 to 21 March 2025.

I would like to thank the Government for facilitating the visit, which was conducted everywhere in a strong spirit of cooperation. I met a wide range of officials from the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Innovation and Culture, including the Minister of State for Public Education and the Minister of Culture and Innovation. I also met representatives of the Educational Authority, the Klebelsberg Center, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Justice, the Curia, Office of the Prosecutor General, the Constitutional Court, Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights of Hungary and the Commissioner for Educational Rights of Hungary.

I visited Miskolc, Dunakeszi and Eger, as well as several villages in the North-Eastern part of Hungary in addition to Budapest. I visited public and church-run schools providing education at diverse levels from kindergarten and elementary, to middle, high and vocational school. I also visited public and church-run universities. During site visits, I spoke with students, parents, teachers and staff, school principals and heads of school districts.

I had very informative and fruitful discussions with academics, university students and faculty, youth associations, teachers' unions and other civil society actors. These meetings provided first-hand insights on the realization of the human right to education in Hungary.

I would like to share my preliminary reflections, noting that the full report on this country visit will be presented to the Human Rights Council in June 2026.

Achievements of the Hungarian education system

During my visit, I met many dedicated professionals committed to providing quality education despite challenging circumstances. Educators and social workers across the country strive to achieve the best outcomes, often with limited resources and their efforts to support multiply disadvantaged children are remarkable.

Hungary has recognized education as a fundamental right since 1948. I commend efforts to ensure free and universal access to public schooling, supported by state-funded textbooks and laptops, meals, sign language support, rehabilitation and transportation for disadvantaged students. Efforts to support children with special needs, scholarships, and subsidized services help reduce barriers to education. Hungary's higher education system has a rich tradition of excellence, producing 15 Nobel Laureates since 1905 and attracting international students with strong academic programs and scholarships that promote global mobility. The Hungarian Commissioner for Education Rights, unique in Europe, handles 25,000 complaints annually while also educating students on their rights and mediating conflicts, ensuring access to remedies. Complaints related to minority education are also addressed by the Hungarian Commissioner for Fundamental Rights.

While Hungary's complex education system has many strengths, there are challenges, many of which are recognized by relevant authorities with efforts made to address them.

Governance of education

Hungary's education system has become increasingly centralized, with responsibilities split between two ministries: the Ministry of Culture and Innovation overseeing higher, vocational and adult education, while the Ministry of Interior controls public education, including primary and secondary schools. Establishing a dedicated Ministry of Education would strengthening pedagogical expertise in education policies.

In 2012, Hungary lowered the compulsory school age from 18 to 16, citing that only 80% remained in school until 18. While secondary school completion has increased slightly, dropout rates among marginalized groups, especially Roma youth, have risen. Economically disadvantaged families may want children not to continue their education so they can start earning. Many end up in low-paid or informal jobs, reinforcing poverty cycles.

New national curriculum and related pedagogy and assessment

Teachers, students and parents expressed concerns about Hungary's 2020 revised national curriculum, which is overly rigid, heavily focused on rote memorization, and overloaded with factual content, leaving little room for discussion, inquiry, analysis or interactive learning. Students reported being overwhelmed, while the school-leaving exam includes irrelevant tasks of memorization, rather than fostering understanding. Teachers are frustrated by strict teaching schedules and limited flexibility in selecting textbooks, with only one or two state-issued options permitted per subject, while, church-run and private schools enjoy greater curricular freedom. The curriculum also fails to adequately reflect the diversity of Hungarian society, for example, Roma culture or LGBTQI+ identities.

The upcoming curriculum review presents an opportunity to enhance student-centered, competency-based approach that prioritizes problem-solving, analytical thinking and creativity over memorization, while reducing curriculum overload and integrating practical life skills. Teachers must be trusted to adapt materials and teaching methods to meet their students' needs, and schools should have greater autonomy to tailor curricula to local contexts, as appears to be a common practice in vocational training.

A transparent and inclusive curriculum review process would facilitate the sense of ownership amongst government, as well as students, parents and education professionals as key stakeholders. Students as young as upper primary school can already articulate how to make education more relevant to their current and future needs and should be consulted.

Educational **assessment** appears to rely heavily on high-stakes exams, while failing to capture their overall competencies. Secondary school placement depends on a single written exam in Hungarian and mathematics, which is decisive for their future, places immense pressure on 8th graders, with limited consideration for their year-round progress or broader skills. Competition for top schools is intense, and many families invest in private tutoring, disadvantaging low-income students and limiting their access to higher education. Similarly, the 12th-grade state exams emphasize memorization over analytical and practical abilities, leaving students feeling unprepared for real-world challenges. Interlocutors emphasized the need for a more balanced system that incorporates continuous assessment and fosters problem-solving and analytical skills through project-based evaluations, emerging in vocational training.

Hollowing out the public sector

I witnessed excellent governmental and non-governmental, including church-run, schools where dedicated educators provide quality education and foster strong communities. I also saw deteriorating infrastructure and was informed by students and teachers of desperate conditions of some schools. I am happy to learn therefore of efforts to improve public school infrastructure, and hope that the most disadvantaged will be prioritized.

However, church-run schools now comprise around 20%, with over 33% of secondary schools now under church control. It would appear that better resourced church schools with financial predictability and regulatory flexibility are able to attract better-qualified teachers and select higher-achieving students leaving less resourced public institutions to cope with a higher concentration of disadvantaged students, although there are church-run projects focusing specifically on economically and otherwise disadvantaged populations. This further strains the public system's capacity to provide equitable education.

Measures to curb selective admissions and promote inclusivity are essential. Equal funding and transparent resource allocation across all school types for public school infrastructure, teacher salaries and student support services will help ensure public schools can fulfil their functions effectively.

Access to and progress through the general education

Hungary's **kindergarten** system supports families but is not formally part of education. Attendance has been mandatory from age three since 2015, with limited postponement options. A 2020 shift from parent-teacher decisions to expert panel assessments made delaying school entry harder, increasing first-grade enrolment but failing to reduce grade repetition. The government's push to turn the final kindergarten year into a school-prep stage, discouraging mixed-age groups and emphasizing academics, has raised concerns. Many parents advocate for maintaining a play-based approach in kindergarten and a smoother transition into primary school.

Expert panels assess school readiness and place students with special educational needs (SEN), but their work lacks transparency, oversight, and resources. Service availability often dictates placements rather than the child's best interests, leaving parents with little say and limited procedural rights. Appeals are ineffective, as the same committee reviews its own decisions, while court challenges take years. Even in mainstream schools, many SEN students receive only minimal support. Assessment should be separate from school placement—one group should evaluate needs, another should determine support and placement. An independent oversight body should review committee decisions, ensuring parents have meaningful appeal options. Equal opportunity experts should be involved in cases affecting Roma and marginalized groups, and a national list of SEN schools and services should be published to help families make informed choices.

Hungary's **secondary** education system includes general secondary schools (41% of students) and vocational schools (58%), aligning with the country's focus on a skills-based economy. While vocational training aims to reduce unemployment and provide direct entry into the labor market, many students from disadvantaged backgrounds struggle due to weak foundational education. Vocational training alone does not guarantee upward mobility, there should be integrated programs combining education, social skills and employment support, as already exists in some places.

In general, there is a need to ensure that education is not limited to only acquiring marketable skills but equips youth for diverse career paths.

School attendance, monitoring and enforcement

The National Education Authority maintains a centralized database to track school attendance, but its enforcement policies raise concerns about excessive surveillance. Strict penalties disproportionately impact disadvantaged families, while a

2013 Constitutional Court ruling allows police to escort children to school, further straining trust between families and the state.

While these measures aim to prevent disengagement, they create a punitive environment rather than addressing the root causes of absenteeism. A more balanced approach is needed, stressing early intervention, social work, and school-based support, with greater authority and resources for social workers and education officials to address absenteeism effectively. The ‘opportunity programme’ in vocational training, for example, enables trainers to make early interventions.

Education for students with Special Educational Needs

Hungary has over 100,000 children with special educational needs (SEN). During the visit, I witnessed exceptional schools where dedicated professionals provide individualized learning plans, therapy and emotional support, demonstrating that with proper resources, SEN children can thrive academically and socially. However, the growing number of SEN students is not matched by adequate teacher training or specialist support. While smaller classes can accommodate one or two SEN students, classrooms with five or six in a group of 30 pose significant challenges. A severe shortage of specialists, including doctors, sign language interpreters and special educators and assistants, further limits the support available.

Co-education depends on expert committee approval and local resources, with students with attention deficit disorders more commonly integrated and 65% of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) attending mainstream schools. However, inclusion varies widely in practice, with some schools offering minimal support and parents reporting that their children often feel unwelcome or face bullying.

To improve inclusion in mainstream schools, increased funding is needed, particularly for rural schools, to provide adequate SEN support. Teacher training must be expanded to equip educators with the skills to address diverse learning needs, and more SEN professionals should be trained and recruited, with improved working conditions to attract and retain them. Where necessary, transportation should be provided for students requiring additional support.

Beneficiaries of these support measures report that with insufficient SEN teachers and psychologists, individualized support is nearly impossible. Travelling experts manage up to 30 children with varying needs, while rural students often receive far less support than recommended. Many see specialists just once a month instead of three times a week, and transportation to SEN-supporting schools is inadequate, forcing parents to cover costs for services that should be publicly funded. The 2020 SEN assessment guidelines are no longer legally binding, further reducing accountability, while many schools lack proper accommodations, leading to exclusion rather than inclusion.

Addressing these challenges requires increased investment in trained professionals, including SEN teachers, therapists, sign language interpreters and school psychologists, and ensuring that a public list of schools accepting SEN students is available. Hungary has some outstanding resources and good practices for integration of children with SEN which should be leveraged and scaled.

Stronger enforcement mechanisms must guarantee that public schools meet accessibility requirements. Mandatory guidelines and resources are needed to support specialized interventions, while a clearer division of responsibilities between the education, healthcare and social sectors would ensure better service integration. Strengthening the legal framework is crucial to securing enforceable obligations for school districts to provide adequate transportation and, where needed, an accompanying adult. Additionally, fostering collaboration between the government and NGOs providing vital expertise and services would enhance support for children with disabilities and their families, with structured funding and referral systems to improve access to assistance.

Systemic segregation of Roma in public education

The 2011 Act on the Rights of Nationalities provides special protections for Roma, yet segregation remains a persistent issue. Roma children are often placed in separate classes or schools under seemingly neutral criteria such as "weaker" and "stronger" groups, leading to systemic educational isolation. A number of nation-wide integration programmes hane been put in place, however, an estimated 35% of Roma students attend majority-Roma schools, and complaints about segregation accounted for 69% of those received by the Ombudsman for Fundamental Rights in 2023. In landmark cases, such as *Gyöngyöspata* (2019-2020) and ECtHR rulings (*Szolcsán v. Hungary, 2023; Horváth and Kiss v. Hungary*, 2013), Roma students were found to be physically separated in schools, using different toilets, lunch areas, and facilities. Many grow up without interacting with non-Roma peers, reinforcing social divisions. The situation is worsened by high dropout rates, particularly among Roma girls, with only 1% of Roma students completing higher education. Strict absenteeism penalties disproportionately affect Roma families, with financial allowances revoked after 30 missed lessons and school removal after 50 absences, further limiting educational opportunities.

While some positive initiatives exist, such as integrated schools, NGO-led programs, and the "300 Catching-Up Villages Programme," efforts remain underfunded and insufficient to address deep-rooted inequalities. A major concern is the systemic over- and misdiagnosis of Roma children with learning disabilities, leading to placement in special education without proper justification. Roma students in special education receive significantly less support than their peers in

mainstream schools, exacerbating their educational disadvantage. Additionally, standardized tests often contain cultural biases that negatively impact Roma students' performance. A lack of ethnic data collection further hinders efforts to address segregation and discrimination. I recommend systematically collecting ethnic data in mainstream and special education to track segregation patterns while ensuring safeguards against misuse. Strict anti-segregation policies must be enforced to prevent Roma students from being wrongly placed in special education and to ensure equal access to quality education as also stressed by the Deputy Ombudsman for Fundamental Rights.

Participation of parents and students in decision-making

I commend Hungary for establishing mechanisms for consultation within the education system.

Nevertheless, students, parents and teachers repeatedly stressed their felt need for ensuring their voices are heard and acted upon through meaningful channels of communication with the government. While official consultations occur a few times a year, stakeholders reported that there is no structured response from authorities and their recommendations and submissions are often ignored.

Ensuring that the government responds to student and parent input—including publishing follow-up actions—would help build trust and accountability.

University student unions have a role in senates, but representation is inconsistent and some student organizations are not legally recognized. Younger students reported that they lack representation, and those who speak up may face targeting or penalties, fostering self-censorship. Regular consultations between the relevant ministry and student unions, parents and teachers with transparent reporting on how their input shapes policies would strengthen democratic processes and enable students and parents to have a say in key school decisions.

Mental health and wellbeing of students

Students reported high levels of stress and anxiety due to exam pressure, social media, and academic expectations from both parents and teachers. Long school days, after-school classes and private tutoring leave them with little free time, while limited opportunities to retake exams or redo grades add to their stress. Post-COVID, anxiety has increased, yet students struggle to find support due to a shortage of school psychologists and the stigma surrounding mental health. Bullying remains a serious issue, especially in grades 1-8, with students fearing that reporting incidents will not lead to meaningful intervention. A more proactive approach, including peer support programs, school coaches, and accessible mental health resources, could help address these challenges. Some universities have introduced a mentorship program where trained university students assist high school students in preparing for entrance exams, providing academic support and guidance.

In September 2024, the government banned the use of mobile phones in schools without pedagogical purpose, for reasons relating to social media-related anxiety and decreased attention spans. While students acknowledge phones can be distracting, they want a say in regulating their use rather than facing an outright ban. The Constitutional Court is reviewing whether this restriction aligns with constitutional rights.

Students expressed their concern that while the government provides free or subsidized school meals through centralized companies, their quality and nutritional value is often poor and standardized portions leave older students hungry. Many families struggle with the high cost of meals while dietary needs remain unaddressed. Some schools could prepare their own meals but are restricted by licensing regulations. A more flexible approach to school meal programs, including locally sourced, healthier options and better accommodation of dietary requirements, could improve students' overall well-being.

Teachers

I have been touched by how deeply concerned all students, including high-school and upper primary school students, are about teachers. They stressed that teachers are underpaid, lack autonomy in teaching and do not receive the respect they deserve. This leads to a teacher shortage and demotivation which directly impacts the quality of their own learning environment and the future of education in Hungary. The articulation of these issues by students in the capital, as well as in other towns and villages, is a clear evidence that Hungary still has dedicated, talented and caring teachers.

Teacher shortage and an aging workforce is a global issue. In Hungary, it is particularly severe in remote areas, where over 40% of schools report a lack of qualified teachers, up from one-third in 2018. Of the 16,000 unfilled teaching positions, 6,000 are covered by non-certified staff or teachers taking on excessive workloads. Alarmingly, 60% of new teachers leave within the first three to four years, particularly in disadvantaged areas. Reportedly, in some schools, shortages force unqualified staff (janitor, doorkeeper) to step in or entire subjects to be canceled. I also want to stress that the proposal of having retired military personnel work in schools is not suitable and was strongly rejected by people I met.

Teachers welcomed recent salary increases, but pointed out that raises were not evenly distributed due to the new performance-based pay system, and created tensions between younger and more experienced teachers, those in vocational schools and others.

Most school teachers also reported excessive administrative duties, large class sizes and an overload of test preparation, limiting their ability to provide individualized support.

While low wages, lack of respect and poor working conditions deter young people from entering the profession, there appears to be no shortage of qualified teachers in top performing schools which allow for some degree of personalized learning and innovative pedagogies.

To address these challenges, it is crucial to fulfil the promise outlined in the Teacher Career Path Act to ensure salaries of all teachers particularly for early and mid-career educators, reaching at least 80% of the average salary of workers with higher education. Additional incentives, such as housing support, relocation assistance for teachers in underserved areas, and loan forgiveness for those entering critical fields like STEM and special education, could help attract and retain talent. Strengthening teacher training is essential, expanding practical experience from the current two-week period to a multi-year hands-on approach that includes work in diverse settings. Teacher training should also equip educators to work with diverse student populations and foster parental engagement. Increasing school responsibilities, allowing principals more control over hiring, budgeting and curriculum adaptation, and reducing administrative burdens through additional teaching assistants would enhance working conditions.

Finally, the government should actively promote the teaching profession and its societal importance while encouraging greater collaboration between educators, unions, and policymakers in decision-making processes. Going further, the 2024 UNESCO global report on teacher shortages and their root causes and my general recommendations contained in the report on teachers (A/78/364) could also provide a useful guidance.

Higher education and research

The transformation of 21 out of Hungary's 63 public universities into institutions run as public interest asset management foundations performing public duty (hereinafter 'foundation')[1] is a subject of intense debate in Hungary. Most interlocutors I engaged with expressed concerns about reduced academic freedom, institutional autonomy and transparency caused by the transfer of control to a board that can override the university senate, including appointing rectors.

As a result of the model change, university employees lost their civil servant status, reducing job security and making academic staff more vulnerable to dismissal, public assets were transferred under the foundation's control. Transparency has suffered, with foundations lacking clear oversight or public accountability, their legal status being unclear.

Initially, the foundation boards were composed of government affiliated figures appointed for life, which precluded these universities from participating in EU-funded academic networks such as Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ which the government compensated by alternative international mobility programmes such as Pannonia Scholarship Programme.

Issues have also been raised regarding conflict of interest and unlimited tenure of board members. The government took action to rectify these concerns through an act adopted by Parliament which will come into effect when the European Commission repeals Decision 2022/2506 of 15 December 2022.

Reportedly, universities that resisted the model change faced tighter budget constraints.

Given the debate, it is important to clarify the legal status of foundations and to increase transparency in the governance and funding of foundation universities, ensuring accountability for public resources. Institutions should have the option to return to public control if desired.

The removal of the research network of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences from the Academy, its reorganisation into an autonomous research network (HUN-REN), and, most recently, the transfer of the Academy's real estate assets to the network is another subject of considerable debate for reasons similar to those of the model change universities.

To strengthen Hungary's research sector, it is essential to ensure the autonomy and academic freedom of research institutes which should be free from political interference. Decision making should be transparent. There should be sustainable funding and competitive salaries for researchers to retain talent and prevent brain drain. Trade unions and academic associations should be meaningfully included in decision-making affecting them.

I will further develop my conclusions and recommendations in my visit report. I would like to once again express my gratitude to the Government of Hungary for inviting me and for facilitating this visit. I am also grateful to every person, who shared their story, their aspirations and concerns. I believe that this visit is just the beginning of the conversation. I remain available to all stakeholders to offer my expertise and advice to work together towards the full realization of the right to education for all.

[1] Act IX of 2021.